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Author

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Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Millennial Capital



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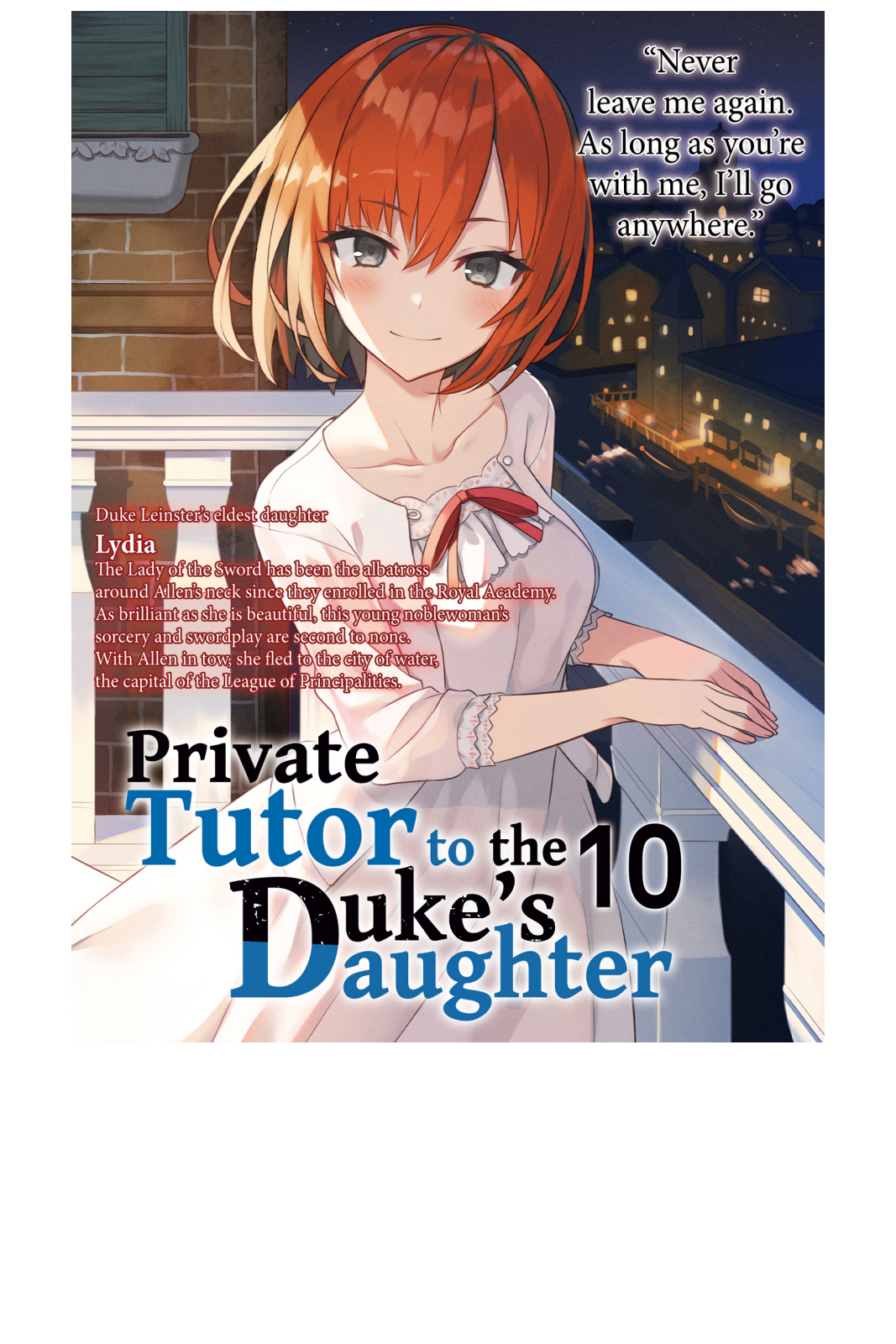
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The Millennial Capital





“Never
leave me again.
As long as you’re
with me, I’ll go
anywhere.”

Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter

Lydia

The Lady of the Sword has been the albatross
around Allen’s neck since they enrolled in the Royal Academy.
As brilliant as she is beautiful, this young noblewoman’s
sorcery and swordplay are second to none.
With Allen in tow, she fled to the city of water,
the capital of the League of Principalities.

Private Tutor to the 10 Duke’s Daughter

The history of the city of water, the heart of the League of Principalities, stretched back into antiquity. At least a thousand years ago, people had gathered on this infertile ground and formed a trading settlement. According to tradition, the beastfolk had built up the city's foundations. Then, people of all races had pooled their efforts to furnish it with the Grand Canal, one of the wonders of the continent. The city of water was the oldest mortal city—a peerless treasure that nameless masses had shown to the world.





Allen's younger sister
Caren

Allen & Co's head clerk
Felicia

"I ate good food,
got plenty of sleep,
and kept active,
and this is how
I turned out!"

"Oooh... Stella,
you meanie."

"Mr. Allen will be
cross if you work
yourself too hard,
Felicia."

Duke Howard's eldest daughter
Stella

Fashion-forward maid
Lily



“So...I stopped
being a person.”

Crescent Moon

Alicia Coalfield

The legendary Shooting Star's lieutenant,
long believed dead.

Private tutor to the dukes' daughters

Allen

“If Duchess

Leticia were here, she
would do everything in her
power to stop you.”

Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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“Same here!
I'm Cindy,
also number six
in the corps!”

“I have been
granted the position
of number six in the
Leinster Maid Corps.
My name is Saki.”

Partnered maids

Cindy & Saki

These two jointly serve as number
six in the Leinster Maid Corps.
Although permanently stationed in the city
of water, they have heard of Allen's exploits
and harbor a deep respect for him.



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Characters



Private tutor to the dukes' daughters
Brain of the Lady of the Sword

ALLEN

The girls' erudite private tutor is slowly but surely making a name for himself at home and abroad.



Allen's adoptive younger sister
Royal Academy student council vice president

CAREN

This wolf-clan girl is levelheaded but shows a needy side around her brother. Stella and Felicia are her best friends.



Thunder Fox

ATRA

One of the Eight Great Elementals, Atra met Allen in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. She normally appears as a young girl or a fox cub.



Hero

ALICE ALVERN

This kind girl wields her absolute power in defense of the world.



Allen & Co. head clerk

FELICIA FOSSE

Although Felicia is shy and physically frail, her brilliant mind is unmatched in fortitude. She oversees logistics in the southern capital.



"The kingdom's most viciously
devious sorcerer"

THE PROFESSOR

Allen's, Lydia's, and Teto's mentor mystifies others with his easygoing attitude. His familiar, Anko, has the form of a black cat.



Allen's star pupil

TETO TIJERINA

This university student in the professor's department idolizes and adores Allen. She hails from the west of the kingdom.



Twin Heavens

LINARIA ETHERHEART

This legendary descendant of witches lived five hundred years ago, during an age of strife. She entrusted Atra to Allen's care.

Characters

➤➤➤➤➤➤ The Northern Ducal House of Howard ◀◀◀◀◀◀◀◀



Duke Howard
"God of war"

WALTER HOWARD

A man of commanding appearance who loves his late wife with all his heart. He vanquished an imperial army at Rostlay.



Duke Howard's eldest daughter
Royal Academy student council president

STELLA HOWARD

Tina's elder sister, the heir to the Dukedom of Howard, is serious and hardworking but craves Allen's attention.



Duke Howard's second daughter
Little Lady of Ice

TINA HOWARD

Her inability to cast spells led some to call her "cursed." But under Allen's tutelage, she took first place on the Royal Academy entrance exam.



Tina's personal maid
Little Lady of Wind

ELLIE WALKER

The granddaughter of the Walkers, hereditary servants to the House of Howard, acts as a mediator in Tina and Lynne's frequent spats.

➤➤➤➤➤➤ The Southern Ducal House of Leinster ◀◀◀◀◀◀◀◀



Duchess Leinster
Bloodstained Lady

LISA LEINSTER

Lydia and Lynne's doting mother is one of the kingdom's mightiest warriors.



Duke Leinster's eldest daughter
Lady of the Sword

LYDIA LEINSTER

Allen's rambunctious partner is the best of the best as both a sorceress and a swordswoman, although she can be emotionally fragile when he's not around.



Duke Leinster's second daughter
Little Lady of Fire

LYNNE LEINSTER

Lydia's younger sister is second in her class at the Royal Academy, and Tina's rival. In the wake of the rebellion, she resolves to keep improving.



The Leinster Maid Corps's number three

LILY LEINSTER

This fashion-forward maid is actually the daughter of Under-duke Leinster. She gets along well with Allen.

Characters

- ANNA** Head maid to the Ducal House of Leinster.
Veteran of the War of the Dark Lord.
- ROMY** The Leinster Maid Corps's second-in-command.
An immigrant from the southern isles.
- SIDA** A Leinster maid in training. Worships the Great Moon.
- MINA WALKER** The Howard Maid Corps's second-in-command.
- SALLY WALKER** The Howard Maid Corps's number four.
Her elder brother, Roland, is a butler.
- CHERYL WAINWRIGHT** The princess.
Attended the Royal Academy with Allen and Lydia.
- LETICIA LEBUFERA** A living legend known as the Emerald Gale.
One of the kingdom's mightiest warriors.
- RICHARD LEINSTER** Duke Leinster's eldest son.
Vice commander of the royal guard.
- GIL ALGREN** Duke Algren's fourth son.
Allen and Lydia's former underclassman.
- CARLYLE CARNIEN** A powerful marchese in the south of the League of Principalities.
He stands in the way of peace with the kingdom.
- ROA RONDOIRO** Heir to a southern principality. She has a history with Carlyle.
- SAINT?** The shadowy mastermind behind the Church of the Holy Spirit.
Who is she really?
- EDITH** A young apostle of the Church of the Holy Spirit.
She battled Stella and Alice in Rostlay.
- ROSA HOWARD** Stella and Tina's late mother. Her maiden name was Etherheart.

Prologue

“Then you’re certain that Mr. Allen escaped the royal capital with Lydia and Atra?” I asked, handing the red-haired man seated across from me a glass of local iced tea.

“Yes, they burned down Marquess Gardner’s house and flew off southward. Thank you. Now I can brag that Lady Stella Howard brewed me tea.” Lord Richard gave me a playful wink, although he was the eldest son of Duke Leinster, governor of the south, and held an important post of his own as vice commander of the royal guard. His subordinates had forced him to take the day off, so he wore a samue to keep cool.

We were in Old Town, a beastfolk district of the kingdom’s eastern capital. This particular courtyard belonged to the parents of my private tutor, Mr. Allen, who also taught my younger sister Tina, our old friend Ellie Walker, and Lord Richard’s younger sister Lynne. The white cloth stretched above our heads shielded us from the sun but let through a refreshing breeze, and I felt right at home in the violet yukata that I’d borrowed from my best friend Caren. Cheerful laughter wafted from inside the house, where Lily and the other Leinster maids were baking treats for the younger girls, who had gone to the Great Tree.

“I’ve been learning from Mrs. Ellyn and the Leinster maids over the past few days,” I said placidly, slowly pouring another glass for myself.

Mrs. Ellyn was Mr. Allen’s mother and one of the few remaining members of the wolf clan anywhere on the continent. She and her husband, Nathan, had found Mr. Allen as a baby and raised him. They were both out shopping at the moment.

“I bet some blue bloods who haven’t kept up with the times will faint when they hear he started a fight in the royal capital,” Lord Richard added. “Although I guess they’d already be out cold, what with my cousin working as a maid.”

His cousin Lily served as the Leinster Maid Corps’s number three. In truth, however, she was the eldest daughter of Under-duke Leinster, who ruled the former Principalities of Etna and Zana on the kingdom’s southern border. She was a ray of sunshine and enjoyed Mr. Allen’s trust—probably more than I did.

“I suppose they’ve gone to the southern capital?” I asked.

Three days ago, Mr. Allen had left us the following note:

I have received a summons from His Royal Highness. I'll be back soon.

Please focus on your assignments in the meantime.

PS: Stella, don't push yourself until you've made a full recovery!

He had then set out for the royal capital with Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and little Atra, who despite her childish appearance was actually the Thunder Fox, one of the Eight Great Elementals. I hadn't worried about the three of them at first, and I'd appreciated his concern for my health. But then had come an urgent message of shocking import:

Mr. Allen refused crown prince's demands, fled royal capital. Gardner house ablaze.

The report came from the Leinsters' head maid, Anna, and the Howard maids' second-in-command, Mina Walker. It seemed inconceivable that they would make a mistake.

"We haven't heard anything from the southern capital yet," Lord Richard said, setting down his glass. "They're still busy fighting the League of Principalities over there. Our maid corps's number five, Celenissa Ceynoth, is in the Great Tree right now, reporting exactly what happened in the royal capital to Dukes Howard and Lebufera, my mother, Duchess Letty, and Lord Rodde. I can't tell you anything definite until I hear from her."

"Oh. I see."

I ran my fingers over the new notebook of assignments that Mr. Allen had left for me. It contained a formula for controlling the element of light and a few words in his hand: "Remember to rest, Stella." The spell was meant to combat the strange condition currently afflicting me, which caused a surge of light every time I used magic.

When did he find time to devise this?

After slaying the Stinging Sea—a monster resurrected by the Church of the Holy Spirit—and saving the city, Mr. Allen had been hospitalized due to fatigue. Since his release, he had come to the aid of his old schoolmate Lord Gil Algren and dueled the legendary "Comet," Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera, for the right to inherit the title of Shooting Star. Yet before his departure, he had produced new assignments not only for me, but for the younger girls as well. He had even left his parents a formal letter. And all while his spare time must have been nearly nonexistent.

Still, I was glad. Merely touching his writing made my heart soar and put a smile on my face. What a simple woman I was.

"Does Princess Cheryl know?" I asked at length.

"I don't know much about the crown prince as a person, but Her Royal Highness is supposed to arrive sometime in the next few days, and she might be able to tell you what you want to know. Not that it's

hard to imagine.” Lord Richard’s eyes flashed. Not for nothing was he Duke Leinster’s heir. He knew what went on in the minds of power-hungry central nobles.

Quietly, I said, “He was wary of Mr. Allen receiving further honors when His Majesty returns.”

The king had granted Mr. Allen the title of Shooting Star in recognition of his martial valor. But although that was a great honor, it didn’t make him a noble. Those conservative aristocrats who hadn’t joined in the rebellion must have gotten ahead of themselves, fearing the future that the advance of meritocracy would bring.

Lord Richard nodded, then moved on to the state of the war. “The two northern marquesses are making their presence felt on our eastern border with the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit. They’ll be reinforced by the western Margrave Solnhofen and forces from the eastern houses. And the easterners will be under the command...of Gil Algren.”

I gave a start. “I’m amazed that my father and Duke Lebufera agreed to that.”

Old Duke Guido Algren had never intended rebellion—the chief plotters had been his sons Grant, Greck, and the missing Gregory. Even so, many areas had seen fierce fighting, and the conflict had claimed lives. So although I had heard of plans to reorganize the Algren forces, I had never imagined that Gil would lead them.

Could it be?

“It was Allen’s idea,” the red-haired knight confirmed, raising his hands slightly. “This will help Gil clear his name, and I’ve been approached privately about letting him join the guard once he graduates from the university. He cried like a baby when he got the appointment, although he claimed he was ‘j-just glad to be getting out of the city before the rest of the department shows up.’”

I slipped my precious sea-green griffin feather out of the bosom of my yukata and pressed it over my heart.

Mr. Allen, please save a little—just a little—more of that kindness for yourself.

Lily and the maids let out a cheer. Apparently, their baking was a success.

“Fighting alongside Allen really brought something home to me,” Lord Richard continued, leaning back in his chair. “I’m cut out for swinging a sword alongside my knights, not running my brain ragged analyzing the situation. Not a great quality for a future duke, wouldn’t you say?”

“I know how you feel,” I said heavily. When it came to natural talent, I could never hold a candle to Lydia, Tina, or Caren. And although I’d resolved to become someone who could protect Mr. Allen

Lord Richard waved his hand. "You'll do fine, Stella. You've got our newly minted Shooting Star on your side. Lynne's quite taken with him, and you know how Lydia is, but I wouldn't dream of barring a Howard lady's path to love."

L-Love? I pressed my hands to my cheeks and found them burning hot. Could other people see me blushing?

After taking a moment to compose myself, I managed a stiff "Thank you very much."

"Please don't tell my mother or Anna. Anyway, the Shooting Star Brigade seem obsessed with their pledges to Allen. They've asked to return west at once. I'm sure they won't take kindly to this uproar in the royal capital."

Two centuries ago, during the War of the Dark Lord, the Shooting Star Brigade had won fame throughout the continent. Recently, Mr. Allen had made four wishes of its former officers—the chieftains of the dwarves, giants, dragonfolk, and demisprites. Reforging Caren's dagger, crafting a new enchanted blade for Lynne, teaching Ellie botanical magic...and discovering the cause of my condition. Not a single one of them concerned him personally.

Lord Richard crossed his legs in ill humor. "Did you hear about the reward Allen's supposed to receive?"

"He's ceding it all to you and Chieftain Ogi," I replied. "Duchess Lisa told me."

"He asked me to distribute it to the families of the fallen in the guard's name, as additional compensation. I'm not to tell the beastfolk."

I was stunned. "What are we to do with him?"

My magician always keeps his priorities straight.

"He gets his way by reducing the psychological burden on others, never mind that he works himself to the bone instead. And the beneficiaries are none the wiser." Lord Richard paused in his praise. "Stella, I want you and Caren to give him a good talking-to the next chance you get."

"W-Well..."

As a person, Mr. Allen was doing the right thing. I only felt the urge to fault him for it because I, personally, had f-feelings for him. So

—
"Yes, sir!" a spritely voice interjected. "You can bet I'll take him to task!"

I turned to see a lovely young woman with a black ribbon and a floral clip in her long scarlet hair. Her top with its pattern of interlocking arrows became her wonderfully, as did her long skirt and leather boots. She carried a tray, on which rested plates of fresh-baked pastry. And a beautiful silver bracelet gleamed on her left wrist.

Unmistakable jealousy stirred in my breast when I recalled that it was supposed to match one worn by Mr. Allen.

This was Lily Leinster, the maid who—alongside Lydia—had unflinchingly leapt to Mr. Allen's aid in a recent duel. She came closer, set her tray on the table, and let out a smug yet musical laugh. "I'm a big sister," she announced, "so lecturing younger boys is one of my most important duties! Have a cookie—they're fresh out of the oven."

When I finally managed to say, "I'd love one, thank you," my voice came out low and menacing.

Stop that, Stella. Yes, I'm green with envy over those matching bracelets, and yes, she's a better baker than me, and I had my nose rubbed in how much Mr. Allen trusts her during that duel, but I must remain calm.

While I ate an infuriatingly delicious cookie in silence, Lord Richard gazed skyward and said, "Lily, please don't make things any more complicated than they already are. Do you *want* to make my uncle cry? I hear he's already dying to make you quit the maid corps and take a husband."

The maid took the seat to my left. "Not to worry!" she replied, bringing her hands together. "I know the magic words!"



“I don’t want to ask,” Lord Richard said heavily, “but let’s hear them.”

“If you want to be my fiancé, defeat Mr. Allen first!”

A fierce blizzard raged in my heart, while Lord Richard pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed. The mana that I’d been suppressing escaped, filling the whole courtyard with dazzling blossoms of light.

Lily gently clasped her hands over mine. “You’re leaking mana, Lady Stella. Calm down and take control.”

“Oh, I...I’m so sorry.” I focused, attempting the spell of control that Mr. Allen had left me. But I had no luck until Lily insinuated herself into my formula. Then, little by little, the glowing flowers subsided.

Is she like Mr. Allen?

“Don’t worry,” the maid said, smiling. “I’ll be here for you while Allen and Atra are away!”

“Lily, how can you cast the same formulae as Mr. A—”

Before I could finish my question, a sudden gust shook the canopy, and a voice from above called, “Stella!”

“Lady T-Tina, be c-careful!” wailed another.

“You never learn, Miss First Place,” sighed a third.

We exchanged glances, then exited the pavilion just as several military griffins touched down. Sitting astride them were...

“Tina! Ellie! Lynne! Caren!”

...My sister and friends, who had been summoned to meet the western chieftains early that morning. A blonde girl in a maid uniform—Ellie Walker, Tina’s personal maid and practically another sister to me—cast a levitation spell, and the whole group dismounted into the courtyard.

My sister raced over, her snow-white ribbon bobbing in platinum hair much like my own. She wore a hair clip that I had given her for good luck and a white military uniform.

“We’ve procured griffins for travel!” Tina announced, jumping up and down in front of me. “What are you waiting for, Stella?! Let’s go!”

“Go where?” I asked.

“To the southern capital,” said a wolf-clan girl with silver-gray hair, ears, and tail.

“Caren?”

My best friend and Mr. Allen’s sister wore her Royal Academy uniform and a floral military beret that a demisprite had given her. “We’ll never get the whole picture if we stay here,” she continued. “And I asked the headmaster when school will resume, but he said it’s still up in the air. So this is our chance to catch up to Allen and Lydia. I doubt they’ll flee the country...but you never know.”

“My dear sister always said that if she abandoned the kingdom, it would be for either Lalannoy or the city of water,” added a red-haired girl in a military uniform and cap.

“Lynne?”

“She normally treats it as a joke,” Lynne Leinster continued. “But now...”

“This does sound like just the thing to cause an outbreak of wanting-Allen-all-to-herself syndrome!” Lily agreed.

Wh-What should I do? They sound awfully convincing.

“Chieftain Chise and the other people Mr. Allen asked for favors say that they can’t start work until they’re back west anyway!” Tina informed me. Chieftain Chise Glenbysidhe, also known as the Flower Sage, was a legendary demisprite sorceress who had supported the great Shooting Star during the War of the Dark Lord.

“And Celenissa told us that we’ve concluded peace with the Yustinian Empire!” Ellie volunteered, breaking her usual reserve.

With the north and east settled but the royal capital in disorder, we would certainly have easier access to information in the southern capital than anywhere else. “B-But”—I hesitated—“we would need father’s permission.”

Tina was ready with an answer. “Father said, ‘Let Stella decide. I expect her answer by this evening’! Only—”

“You girls mustn’t go alone.”

“Indeed not.”

“Duchess Lisa, Duchess Letty,” I gasped, turning with everyone else to face the two gorgeous women—one human and one elven—who had spoken from the veranda. Duchess Lisa Leinster and Duchess Emerita Leticia Lebufera were living legends, the fame of whose battle prowess resounded the length and breadth of the continent.

“Goodness!” Mrs. Ellyn cried from inside the house. She had evidently returned as well. “It’s so good to see you again, Celenissa.”

“Y-You remember my name?” came the stunned reply.

Tina and Ellie tugged on my sleeves, and Lynne and Caren joined them in calling my name, urging me to make up my mind. Common sense dictated that we remain where we were until the situation in the royal capital resolved itself. I also had my health to consider—what was the good of pursuing Mr. Allen when I couldn’t so much as cast a spell properly? And yet...

Stella, do you really want to leave Lydia alone with Mr. Allen?

In a small voice, I murmured, “No.” Then I met the two duchesses’ gazes and said, “We will all travel to the southern capital. May we have your permission?”

“Not without a guard,” Duchess Lisa replied.

“Persuade that lass,” added Duchess Letty. Both women’s eyes

were on Lily.

The maid made a show of assuming a defensive stance. The bracelet on her left wrist caught the light as she declared, “Grrr! You won’t get the better of me, my ladies! Allen will be ever so cross if I take you all south!”

Just the reaction I would have expected. I felt a smidgen of malice well up in me. So, smiling, I made an offer that she couldn’t refuse.

“Lily, how would you like a maid uniform?”

A lock of her scarlet hair shot bolt upright and swayed wildly.

She’s rattled. Now is our chance. I shot a look at Caren. *Keep up the pressure!*

“Felicia is in the southern capital,” my best friend said, joining the assault. “She can sew with the best of them. It would be easy for her to whip up a maid uniform or two in next to no ti—”

“Leinster Maid Corps number three, Lily, at your service! For a maid uniform, my ladies, I would accompany you to the ends of the earth! Dare I say, yahoo!”

“L-Lily?! What do you think you’re doing?!” Lynne cried, letting out a little shriek as the maid seized her by both hands and began to twirl in place.

The red-haired knight cocked his head and muttered under his breath, “I could have sworn that you needed Anna’s and Romy’s approval to issue a maid uniform.”

“Lord Richard,” I said, shooting a glance his way.

“O-Oh, don’t mind me, Stella. I didn’t say a thing,” he amended, terror-stricken but agreeable. “Give my best to Allen.”

I met the eyes of Caren, Tina, Ellie, and the newly liberated Lynne in turn, and we all nodded. We would set out for the southern capital the next morning. In the meantime, we would need to pack for—

“My! You all look like you’re enjoying yourselves.” A musical voice intruded on my thoughts.

“Caren, come here,” said another newcomer.

“Mother!” the three younger girls cried in unison.

“Dad?” Caren asked.

“M-Mrs. Ellyn, Mr. Nathan,” I murmured as a wolf-clan couple with silver-gray hair—Mr. Allen’s parents—stepped out into the courtyard, looking quite fetching in a kimono and samue, respectively.

The girls leapt into Mrs. Ellyn’s arms, shouting, “Squeeeeeeze!”

“Goodness!” she exclaimed, her gaze warm as a sunbeam.

Caren, meanwhile, was receiving a number of small cloth bags from Mr. Nathan. Charms, perhaps?

“If you’re going after Allen, take these with you,” he was saying. “And be very careful.”

Caren’s eyes widened. “Aren’t these the protective amulets that—

Dad, thank you.”

I alone lagged behind the group, but Lord Richard and Lily looked my way, silently urging me to Mrs. Ellyn’s side.

“Stella,” she called gently.

“Mrs. E— I mean, m-mother— Oh...”

I had finally called her “mother” for the first time, but, to my embarrassment, my voice had cracked.

She squeezed my hands. “I do hope you’ll join us again,” she said, with a tranquil smile so much like Mr. Allen’s. “I’ll have a yukata ready for you next time.”

“Y-Yes! Of course! I promise!” After a brief pause, I continued in a calmer tone, “Thank you so much.”

Mrs. Ellyn laughed and said, “Squeeze!” as she caught me up in a hug.

Mr. Allen! I called out in my heart. *I will chase after you. You can scold me once I catch up. So please, forgive me this bit of selfishness.*

We were bound for the southern capital, seat of the Ducal House of Leinster!



The girls got right to work preparing for their trip south.

“Caren, Ellie, try to pack light,” Stella cautioned. “We’ll go straight as the bird flies, without passing through the royal capital.”

“Right.”

“Y-Yes’m!”

“Now, Lady Tina, Lady Lynne, please draw straws,” Lily said. “We only have so many griffins, so one of you will be riding with me!”

Both girls groaned.

“I’d better make sure you eat well tonight!” Ellyn announced, taking charge of dinner. “Lisa, ladies, would you kindly lend me a hand?”

“Depend upon it,” my mother replied. Then she turned to me and said, “Richard, keep Letty company.”

A chorus of “Yes, Mrs. Ellyn!” followed.

The maids are one thing, but mother? I signaled my assent with a wave of my hand. *Allen really does have a lot to answer for. I’d better write to my own dear fiancée Sasha.*

Nathan caught my eye from the hallway, so I gave him a nod. He made the shape of a cup with one hand and returned to his workshop. I would have to speak to Dag, the former deputy chieftain of the otter clan, and arrange a drinking session while I was in the city.

I drained my tea, then turned back to Duchess Letty, who had unfurled a map on the table.

“Truly, what an odd wolf,” the jade-haired beauty murmured as

she watched Ellyn. "Would you believe she learned amplification magic from Chise's younger sister, who took off from her people's village a few decades past and has been missing ever since?" She chuckled. "That story brought Chise to tears."

"A strange coincidence, I suppose." A moment passed in silence, then I said, "Duchess Letty, may I ask you something?"

"Hm? Proceed."

"Then I'll be brief. Who is directing events in the royal capital?"

The affair was strange from top to bottom. His Majesty, renowned for his courage, had remained in the western capital while the timid Crown Prince John summoned Allen. From the one, the title of Shooting Star. From the other, some demand that Allen couldn't stomach.

Most of our maid corps's officers were concentrated in the royal capital, leaving only Lily out east with us. The same went for the Howard Maid Corps's fearsome combat arm under the command of Mina Walker, even though Stella, Tina, and Ellie were all in the eastern capital. And Celenissa had returned just when she was needed, as if she had foreseen Lily's trip south.

The messages that I'd received from the royal guard's Commander Owain and Staff Officer Renown Bor in the western capital read, "We have no part to play for the present" and "Please get some rest. In fact, rest. That's an order." And above all, Ellyn and Nathan, who loved Allen with all their hearts, seemed cool as cucumbers. Something was up.

Duchess Letty elegantly sipped her tea, her gaze as cold as it was on the battlefield. "The professor was the artist behind this composition," she replied. "Along with Head Court Sorcerer Gerhard Gardner. Now Rodde has set out for the royal capital as well. The Howards and Lebuferas will not make their moves quite yet."

I was stunned. *The professor and Gardner?! That's the worst, most devious combination I could possibly imagine!*

"Chise holds Caren and her friends in high regard," Duchess Letty continued, sliding a small memo across the table with a wind spell. "Though incomplete, mayhap this will convince even our peoples' hardheaded elders to change their minds. It may offer an opportunity to halt magic's decline."

I ran my eyes over the note. *You've got to be kidding me. I knew those girls were bursting with talent, but I never suspected this.*

It read:

Caren: An unparalleled case of atavism. With training and the commander's dagger, she will become a true lightning wolf.

Stella: Strong indications of future mana awakening. If true, she will be the first candidate in a century.

Ellie: Extremely high aptitude for botanical magic. A Walker and yet not a Walker.

I didn't know all of the terms used, but this was serious. A matter of the utmost gravity.

“Extraordinary talents are drawn to each other, coming together in a great, big vortex that will change the world,” Duchess Letty recited, almost singing. “’Twas my dear departed friend Crescent Moon—Alicia—who belted that out on the battlefield, I believe.”

After a moment, she continued, “His Majesty has answered Guido's devotion, and the fall of the central aristocracy is now inevitable. We cannot take our eyes off the Knights of the Holy Spirit, Gerard vanished en route to the royal capital, and neither the third Algren boy who went over the waterfall nor the beastfolk traitors have been found. We must question the Lalannoyans as well. Yet even so...” The cheerful beauty's slender finger moved, passing over the southern capital, and struck at the heart of the League of Principalities—the city of water. “We must begin in the south. Let us see just what the Shooting Star of this new age is made of.”

Chapter 1

“Here you are at last!” our young otter-clan gondolier, Suzu, cheerfully announced, turning to us as she smoothly brought her craft to a halt before our destination. “The boat sways, so watch your step.”

Suzu had a slight build and wore her dark-brown hair plaited. I had heard that the city’s gondoliers enjoyed choosing striking designs for their clothing, and depictions of the Great Tree and countless flowers adorned her white hat and garments. Her gondola was old, splendidly carved, and lined with a red carpet.

“You must be a master with that oar,” I said. “Stopping perfectly in this narrow waterway is no mean feat.” Her handling would still have impressed me on the famous Grand Canal, but it beggared belief in the cramped confines of this side channel lined with luxury hotels. If I’d spread my arms, I might well have touched the walls on either side.

“Thank you, Allen.” The fifteen-year-old laughed bashfully, and I felt tempted to join in. I had never expected to meet an otter-clan girl so far from the eastern capital.

Behind me, a noblewoman with short scarlet hair ostentatiously cleared her throat. She said nothing, but she meant, “You have some nerve, acting like that in front of me.” I was quaking in my boots.

Lifting a leather suitcase, I stepped onto land. An orange-brick hotel towered before me. The edifice occupied prime real estate at the entrance to the Grand Canal, and heavy wooden doors were a testament to its long history.

“Atra, this is our stop!” I called to the child in the gondola’s stern, who was wagging her tail as she gazed delightedly into the water. Her white cloth hat and dress made for a charming ensemble. A gentle evening sea breeze passed us by, rustling her violet ribbon and long white hair.

“Lydia—”

“Of course.” The stunning, scarlet-haired young woman rose smoothly from her cushion. Lydia Leinster, my partner ever since we had enrolled in the Royal Academy, was dressed to match Atra, with the addition of an unfurled parasol. Her Highness looked every bit a daughter of one of the foremost noble houses in the kingdom.

If only she were always so well-behaved...

Lydia approached, so I offered her my right hand. She seized it

with a short “Mm.”

Once on land, she closed her parasol, handed it to me, and whispered in my ear, “Wouldn’t a well-behaved lady bore you to tears?”

“D-Don’t read my expressions like that!”

“You can’t hide anything from me.”

I groaned.

“Now that’s a loving couple if I’ve ever seen one!” Suzu exclaimed, eyes sparkling. “I hope I can be like you someday.”

“W-We’re not—”

“We get along well enough,” Lydia interrupted, latching on to my left arm before I could clear up the misunderstanding. “Come along, Atra.”

The child turned to stare at us, then trotted across the gondola.

“Now, Atra, can you jump on your own?” I asked, stealthily casting a levitation spell to assist her.

“Jump!” she chirped, hopping toward us.

“Very good,” Lydia and I chorused as we both caught her hands.

Atra wagged her tail in delight and shook her whole body along with it.

Simply adorable.

I entrusted the child to Lydia and turned back to Suzu. “Thank you for ferrying us all the way from the far shore,” I said, handing the gondolier her fare in a small leather purse. “We truly appreciate it.”

“Don’t mention it!” the otter-clan girl demurred, waving her hands wildly. She didn’t even bother to count her money. “I’m just glad to finally have work again! We haven’t had many visitors from abroad lately, what with the north being such a mess, so I hope you’ll remember me when you go sightseeing. Oh, and my grandpa runs a secondhand shop in Cat Alley—a market that covers a whole island. If that sounds interesting, it’s well worth a look!”

What a nice girl.

I glanced at Lydia, whose eyes said, “Go ahead and ask her.” At times like this, we were always on the same page.

“That sounds like fun,” I replied. “We’d love to visit if we get the chance.”

“Please do. And before I forget...” Standing in the bow of her gondola, with one hand on the oar, she delivered a time-honored greeting. “Welcome to the city of water: the Millennial Capital. May the flower and water dragons watch over you.”



I couldn’t suppress a gasp as I entered the Water Dragon Inn, one of the city’s finest hotels. The spacious atrium lobby was four stories

high, with a magnificent staircase in its center. The rays of the evening sun filtered through frosted-glass skylights, coloring the antique stone columns and tiled floor. Two young women—presumably guests—were enjoying the view from the café overlooking the Grand Canal. One was of the bird clan, rarely seen in the eastern capital.

So even beastfolk are welcome here.

Much of the wooden furniture was antique as well, contributing to the tranquil atmosphere. According to Lydia, this building had been the doge's mansion two centuries and a few decades or so ago. Since its conversion into a hotel, it had garnered an international reputation for luxury.

As a humble commoner, I had never lodged anywhere so grand. I *had* stayed at various Leinster and Howard mansions, of course, but—

Lydia elbowed me without letting go of my left arm. "Stop staring into space and go to the front desk."

"As you wish," I replied.

Atra, who held Lydia's other hand, hummed contentedly.

As we passed the café, I overheard the women's conversation. The bird-clan woman, whose black hair was just long enough to cover her ears, held her peace, while her human companion, whose milk-white hair brushed her shoulders, did all the talking.

"What? Wouldn't you rather go here?"

Silence.

"But you know, we can't forget about this place either."

And so on.

Perhaps they were travelers from some land east of the league—the free city-states, or maybe the commonwealth. There was a war on, and Suzu had mentioned a drop-off in tourism, but—

Lydia elbowed me again. We had reached the front desk while I was lost in thought. Behind it stood a calm gentleman nearing old age.

"Welcome to our humble hotel," he said. "Do you have a reservation?" Despite our youth, his tone was impeccably courteous.

So this is first-rate service.

While I was busy being impressed, Lydia answered, "No." We had come straight here after escaping the royal capital.

What now?

I shot Lydia a questioning look, but she was undaunted.

The elderly gentleman, however, frowned. "Is that so? Then I'm terribly sorry, but we have no vacancies at present. May I suggest—"

"Here," Lydia interrupted, placing something on the front desk—half of an old coin that had been broken in two.

"Is this...?" The gentleman's eyes widened. Then his expression changed completely. "Please forgive me. I will have your room made

ready at once. Would you be so good as to sign your names here? Oh, but I have yet to mention mine. I am Paolo, the manager of this establishment. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Still reeling from his about-face, I ran my eyes over the fine paper he proffered to us.

Being an orphan and a member of the wolf clan by adoption, I had no surname. The hotel might not welcome a “houseless” guest. Yet I could hardly write “Leinster” either—our nations were, after all, at war. So, what was I to—

A certain girl crossed my mind.

Taking up the fountain pen, I signed, “Allen Alvern.” Borrowing the Hero’s surname might betray a lack of reverence, but Alice would forgive me.

Lydia watched over my left shoulder. After a disgruntled “Humph,” she swiftly added her own flowing signature: “Lydia Alvern.”

“Atra?” Lydia said as the child looked up at me.

“Yes, we might as well,” I replied.

We traded places, and Atra happily began to sing.

“Thank you very much,” Paolo said, observing us with a tender look. “Now, please follow me. As for your luggage—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” I cut in, casting a spell with a swish of my right index finger.

“Dear me,” the astonished old gentleman murmured as the suitcase floated off the ground.

“It’s a fairly simple spell,” I told him. Although levitation came in handy, it wasn’t widely practiced. My former schoolmate Teto Tijerina might have been the only other person in my social circle who made habitual use of it.

I wonder if she’s reached the eastern capital yet.

Lydia gave me an exasperated look. “You and Teto are the weird ones for casting that all the time. Atra, it’s time to get down.”

The child gave her a quizzical look and then a yap of protest.

“What?! You ‘love Allen’s hugs’?!”

Their friendly horseplay only escalated from there. Honestly, they were incorrigible.

When I glanced over at the café, the two women were no longer there.

“Would you show us to our room?” I asked the waiting Paolo. “And please tell us a little about this hotel on the way.”



“Oh, wow.” Another admiring gasp escaped me as we reached our room on the top floor.

The ample bed and sofa were luxurious yet tasteful. The wooden table and chairs were clearly of the very best quality, and we had a private telephone—still quite the rarity. The windows in front of us looked out on the Grand Canal and the islands that comprised the city, all dyed in the light of the evening sun. We even had a balcony.

Seeing me speechless, Paolo proudly launched into an explanation. “The suite includes a bathroom and a kitchen furnished with an icebox made in the kingdom. Please leave all laundry in the hamper provided. You may have dinner served in your room, but I urge you to dine on our outdoor terrace at least once during your stay. Here is your key.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting a key whose design evoked the flower and water dragons.

Paolo bowed deeply. “If you need anything at all, please do not hesitate to ask. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Atra had waited impatiently through our conversation. But no sooner had the door shut than she scampered off toward the balcony.

“Whoa there!” I exclaimed, removing her hat with a wind spell and securing invisible threads to her to prevent a fall. “Don’t lean over the railing, now, Atra.”

Her ears and tail twitched as she left the room. What a little bundle of energy.

I released my spell on the suitcase, lowering it to the ground, and Lydia immediately latched on to me.

“Mmm.”

“Yes, yes,” I replied, removing the hat from her scarlet hair and hanging it on a peg beside Atra’s.

Lydia darted behind me and snapped, “Only one ‘yes!’” while she helped me out of my coat with practiced skill. I let her have her way—to do otherwise would spoil her mood. She slipped my watch out of a pocket and deposited it on the table, then gently set her own beside it so that the chains touched. When she had finished hanging my coat on the rack, she let out a little giggle—and dove onto the bed.

“Mind your manners,” I scolded as she kicked her feet, for all the world like an excited child on vacation.

She only laughed louder.

“You’ll rumple your clothes.”

Fed up with my partner’s antics, I left her parasol leaning against the wall and gazed out the windows. The buildings of the city of water were slowly lighting up as night approached. Although uniform in height, their variations in form and coloring made for an enthralling view. Boats and gondolas seemed to glide across the surface of the Grand Canal below, while locals paused to chat on the bridges. And a veritable menagerie of seabirds flying every which way completed the

picturesque scene.

Atra was likewise admiring the view from her perch atop a chair on the balcony.

This might be a good night for a glass of wine in the open air.

"Lydia," I called to the reclining noblewoman as I opened the suitcase and started unpacking.

"Hm?"

"I think it's about time I got some answers, don't you?"

She stopped kicking her feet, stared at me, and patted the bed. "Mmm."

"Um... What exactly are you requesting?"

"Mmm!" She struck the bed harder.

I can't give in now. It will set a dangerous precedent.

"You know," I said, "I think I'll take in the view with Atra."

"*Mmm!*" Lydia pounded the bed with not only her hand but her entire body.

Act your age!

Experience had taught me that she would keep this up until I acquiesced to her demands. So I pressed a hand to my forehead and sighed. Ultimate victory over this highborn young woman had always eluded me.

Closing the suitcase, I walked over to the bed and sat down. "Why on earth are you—"

My question ended in a squawk as a sudden tug on my hand toppled me to the mattress.

I stared into the most beautiful face I knew—although it was pouting at the moment. "Why 'Alvern'?" its owner whined, pummeling my chest with both fists. "That was your cue to sign 'Leinster'! Do you care more about that undersized Hero than your own mistress?!"

"Well," I replied, "we *are* technically in the heart of enemy territory."

Our homeland, the Wainwright Kingdom, was currently at war with the League of Principalities. And Lydia's family, the Ducal House of Leinster, was leading the kingdom's southern nobility to do the bulk of the fighting. Intellectually, the willful noblewoman must have understood this, but she found it difficult to accept, if her frustrated groan was anything to go by.

Lydia took the liberty of placing my left hand on her head, then started fiddling with my right. The ring on my third finger was set with a radiant red gemstone. It belonged to Linaria Etherheart, also known as Twin Heavens, who had placed Atra in my care following our encounter in a ruin on the Four Heroes Sea. And according to her, I couldn't remove it until I surpassed her skill.

The silver bracelet on my wrist had been a parting gift from Lily when we'd left the eastern capital. I *could* take it off, but I had a feeling that she would be cross if I did—especially since my dad had put a lot of work into making it.



Lydia pressed closer to me. I glimpsed an inferno of jealousy in her narrowed eyes as she murmured, "First a ring and now a bracelet. You know—"

"Slicing and burning are both off the table."

I wouldn't put either past her.

"Cheater," she growled, repositioning my arms to cradle her head. "Unbelievable. You'd better make it up to me, or I'll be furious."

"Do you, um, have anything in mind?" I asked, tenderly running my fingers through her scarlet hair, which seemed to be recovering nicely.

"I... I want to take a bath together!"

"That was never in the cards."

Lydia gaped at me in disbelief.

"Your hair color is hard to miss, so you should use the tub in our room with Atra," I said, scratching my cheek. "I'll try the large bath that Paolo mentioned. But first...may I ask you one serious question?"

"You may." In the tone of a lecturer, Lydia added, "Let me guess: 'Why the city of water and not the southern capital?'"

"Correct," I replied, with a shrug. "You don't seriously intend to seek asylum, do you?"

"Would you like to? I wouldn't mind."

"I wish you weren't so quick to joke about that."

"Silly." Her scarlet-haired Highness pressed her forehead against me and closed her eyes. "Does my 'Brain' really think I'm kidding? You, of all people, must be able to see the big picture by now."

Teto had written that Cheryl would make for the eastern capital as soon as train service was restored. Duke Walter Howard had suggested that I take some time off. And then there was that profound intelligence in Crown Prince John's eyes during my interrogation. His Royal Highness could hardly have believed that I would hand over Atra as he'd demanded.

I whispered my answer in Lydia's ear. "His Majesty is thinking of 'cleaning house' in the royal capital—sweeping away the fence-sitters and any nobles with ties to Lalannoy. But he doesn't want us to see it happen."

"Right," she replied. "Teto said as much in her letter. Cheryl is in the dark, by the way. Knowing how bizarrely conscientious Her Royal Highness can be, she would absolutely try to stop it. And so would you!"

Princess Cheryl Wainwright, who had attended the Royal Academy with Lydia and me, possessed almost boundless compassion in addition to a strong sense of right and wrong. She wouldn't wish for bloodshed—not even if she understood that it would change the

kingdom's future for the better.

"I'm shocked that Teto would tell you more than she did me," I said, nodding. "But that still doesn't answer my question. Did we really need to come all the way to the city of water? Wouldn't the southern capital have done just as well?"

If I surmised correctly, I had been summoned to the royal capital to take part in a farce. Old Duke Guido Algren had risked his own life as well as the future of his house, and His Majesty would not let such devotion go to waste. He had, it seemed, resolved to exterminate the snakes nesting in the kingdom's bosom. And I had made the perfect bait for his trap.

Lydia prodded my left cheek with a dainty finger. "You wouldn't have been able to resist helping my grandfather and Felicia if we'd gone there. And you'd have made sure they got all the glory when the war ended too!"

"D-Don't be silly." I pictured the mild face of Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster, who was overseeing logistics in the southern capital, and the determined expression of Felicia Fosse, his assistant for the time being.

To be frank, it's possible.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman squeezed both of my hands, and we sat up together. "Allen," she said, looking mature and a trifle tense. My partner was a great beauty. "I'll tell you what your official role here is. You're our man in the city of water."

"Lydia?!"

"Don't say anything!" she snapped, eyes blazing.

O-Oh dear! Sh-She's...in earnest.

"My whole family—except for Lynne, Lily, and my fool of a brother—has already given you its seal of approval. The same goes for Duke Howard, Duke Lebufera, Duchess Letty, and even His Majesty in the western capital. I doubt I need to tell you this, but you don't actually need to *do* anything. Your job here"—Lydia grinned from ear to ear as she clinched the argument—"is simply 'to remain in the city of water and observe the league for a period of time, relaying the positions of those who contact you to the southern capital.' Our elders will sort the rest out among themselves. Despite all the confusion, the actual military situation is overwhelmingly in our favor, so you can bet that anyone reasonable will compromise to keep the league intact. And when all is said and done, you'll be famous at home and abroad. The kingdom's public records will *have* to mention you this time—as a key architect of peace on the southern front. I'd say that revealing how things stand in the heart of enemy territory is quite an achievement, wouldn't you?"

"Wh-What lunatic had the idea to give *me* that job?! D-Duke Liam

and Duchess Lisa would never think of— D-Don't tell me...!" A sudden realization left me speechless. When we'd left the royal capital, Anko—the black-cat familiar who commanded my eternal love and devotion—had accompanied the Leinsters' head maid, Anna.

"My mother won't like it if she hears you've been using her title," Lydia murmured, smirking with the assurance of victory as she nuzzled against my chest. "And yes, I hear it was the professor's idea. Teto had you completely fooled, didn't she? She told *me* that he's already wrapped up talks with the Yustinians and moved on to the royal capital."

"I... I'd expect no better from the professor, but Anko and Teto?! I-It can't be. Th-Then, His Majesty and the royal guard aren't still in the western capital because they're guarding Blood River against the Dark Lord's forces. They're..."

"His Majesty and that sword-maniac Owain staying put should have been your first clue that something was up. If they were acting like themselves, they would have turned around and retaken the capital themselves ages ago."

She was right. Our king was currently known for his prudence, but he was also a dauntless warrior. Despite his birth, he had once entered the Royal Tournament and won. And Commander Owain Albright of the royal guard rivaled the Lady of the Sword in terms of pure skill with a blade, while the knights under his command were battle-hardened fighters. I should have questioned their passivity.

"L-Lydia," I pleaded, sounding pathetic even to my own ears.

"I won't budge on this. Not on your life," she answered, cruel and determined. "Listen, you *need* to come up in the world! I've waited for four years. Four. Whole. Years. And I can't wait anymore. I refuse to. The title of Shooting Star is a first step, and I'm really, truly proud of you. So this time, rise high enough to stand confidently beside me in front of the whole world! Or else I really will seek asylum here!"

I breathed a deep, drawn-out sigh.

Outside, Atra was engrossed in conversation with passing seabirds.

Hm? Is that a trace of strange mana I sense?

I made a mental note of it as I reached out and stroked Lydia's scarlet hair with my left hand. "Honestly! You're impossible."

"You only just noticed?" Her usual confidence vanished as she added, "Will that make you hate me?" She took my hands and pressed them to her own cheeks, her eyes moist and insecure. I was looking not at the Lady of the Sword but at a young woman who would be older than me again before much longer.

I recalled something that my dad had once said to me: "Allen, be kind to girls."

I agree, dad. But it is a bit embarrassing.

I slid off the bed, trying not to show how flustered I felt.

“U-Uh, um... A-Allen?” Lydia faltered, confused, as I took her left hand and pressed my lips to it. Her cheeks flushed immediately. Then she clutched her left hand to her chest and froze.

A regular kiss might have been less embarrassing.

I knew that I must have been blushing just as furiously as I said, “In the name of the Great Tree and my parents, I swear: Lydia, I will never hate you.”

An oath by the Great Tree was among the most potent that any beastfolk could swear. And as far as I was concerned, my parents were just as sacred. Lydia knew that better than anyone, which was why her blush spread from her cheeks to her head. With a sigh, she flumped back onto the bed, where she proceeded to roll around, moaning.

“Come on,” I ribbed her to cover my own embarrassment, “are these theatrics really called fo—”

A pillow collided with my face. Its thrower swiftly closed the distance between us and began pummeling my chest, breathing heavily.

“Ow!” I cried. “Hey, that hurts!”

“Sh-Shut up! Shut up! *Shut up!* D-Don’t catch me off guard like that! Do you *want* to give me a heart attack?! It’s... It’s not playing fair...okay?”

I took Lydia’s hands, and our eyes met. One person really could be both gorgeous and adorable at the same—

Atra squeezed between us, bright-eyed with excitement.

Lydia and I blinked, then burst out laughing in unison.

I can’t articulate this well...but right now, I’m not unfortunate.

Lydia hugged my left arm and nestled her head on my shoulder. She must have felt the same way.

“Welcome back, Atra,” I said, plucking seabird feathers from the child’s ears and hair. “Will you tell us about all the fun you had?”



The history of the city of water, the heart of the League of Principalities, stretched back into antiquity. As the books told it, there had originally been nothing on this spot. Or to be precise, there had been only a tidal flat dotted with countless tiny islands. Naturally, the area hadn’t lent itself to agriculture and had, in that sense, resisted settlement. This harsh natural environment had forced the local residents to make their living through trade.

When had people first begun to gather and build homes here? Academically speaking, the jury was out. But the city had certainly

existed for at least a thousand years. According to tradition, the beastfolk had been its first permanent residents. They had made their oldest dwellings by driving boughs of the Great Tree into what was now the central island and into a northern island where they had secured a supply of fresh water.

Since then, people had hammered innumerable wooden posts into the tidal flat and reinforced them with stone, creating foundations at the cost of unimaginable time and labor. They had reared bridges and dug canals between the tiny islands, culminating in the construction of both an assembly hall that rivaled the kingdom's royal palace and the Grand Canal, which bisected the city from north to south. The city of water was the oldest mortal city—a peerless treasure that nameless masses had shown to the world.

“Tell me, Allen, what’s on your mind?” Lydia asked, looking cool as a cucumber as she held out her empty teacup toward me from across the table. The dishes had already been cleared from atop the white tablecloth, leaving only a pot of after-dinner tea and desserts made from frozen milk. The light of the mana lamps revealed that we shared the Water Dragon Inn’s rooftop terrace with the two women whom I’d seen in the café. The paucity of other guests lent the place a somewhat lonesome atmosphere.

“The view at night is even more beautiful than I’d imagined,” I replied, refilling Lydia’s cup. “I was recalling travelers’ accounts I’ve read.”

“Oh, really?” Lydia’s reproving glare was easy to read. It said, “Shouldn’t your eyes be on something else right now?”

“Er... Your dress is lovely?” I ventured. She had changed out of her white dress into a sheer and sophisticated scarlet gown. I had already sung its praises in our room, but apparently not enough.

“Why did that sound like a question? This calls for instruction. Tell me, what *should* you do at a time like this?”

“Oh, all right.” Giving in, I dipped a small spoon into my frozen confection and held it out toward Lydia’s mouth.

“Very good.” Her Highness broke into a satisfied smile and gulped it down.

Atra, who had been contending with her own dessert in the seat beside Lydia, blinked in surprise, then turned to me and opened her mouth.

“Look, now you’ve started Atra doing it,” I chided Lydia while feeding the child frozen cream. “You’re setting a bad example.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Lydia retorted, speaking rapidly while she wiped Atra’s mouth with a handkerchief. “I merely invoked my natural rights as your mistress and”—her voice started to shake—“w-wife.”

I sipped my tea. Its refreshing aroma put me in mind of citrus. Once I was master of myself again, I said, "If you're embarrassed to say it, why force yourself?"

"O-Oh, be quiet! D-Don't harp on every little— Not that it is little, of course. It's terribly, dreadfully important, but—"

"Which is it, then?"

"What?" Lydia pouted as she helped Atra to drink her tea. "You mean it's not important to *you*?"

"Answering a question with a question doesn't strike me as fair play."

"Tell me." Although Lydia spoke like a self-possessed adult, the nervous glimmer in her eyes portended tears. Mentally, it seemed, she was still somewhat fragile after her ordeal.

I gave her the best answer I could muster: "I'm Allen Alvern now, aren't I?"

"Yes."

"And you're Lydia Alvern. What more do you need to know?"

The noblewoman blinked her big eyes, taking in my meaning. "Couldn't you have come right out and said it?" she muttered, blushing bright red. "I can't believe you. You big, ridiculous oaf."

"I don't think that's anything new," I said wryly, returning to the scenic view. The nighttime cityscape blended into the darkness, its windows countless pinpricks of light. That large building on the central island must have been the assembly hall, but I would need to return in the morning to spot the famous Grand Library or the northern island's Seven Dragons Plaza. In the far distance, beams of light marked a group of enormous lighthouses—the league's pride and joy, built to prevent large ships from foundering on its shores.

"Hey!" Lydia snapped, prodding my cheek. "There you go, making that weird face again."

Atra happily copied her gesture from my other side.

"It's not as though my face was ever anything to write home about," I responded stiffly.

"Oh? What's this? Is someone sulking?"

I groaned. Lydia seized the opportunity to laugh at my expense, and Atra mimicked her mockery.

Then Paolo walked up in the midst of our after-dinner relaxation. "A pleasant evening, is it not?" he said, all smiles. "Was the meal to your liking?"

"Yes, it was delicious," I replied, just as Lydia pronounced the food "passable" and Atra sang a note. Even the professor, who had given over three quarters of his soul to gourmet tourism, would have been content with the numerous dishes that had comprised the night's repast.

“I assume that the fish and vegetables were local, but would you mind telling me the source of this tea and the ingredients that went into this dessert?” I asked. Then I sprinkled in a few untruths for good measure. “It’s not often that we’re able to come here all the way from the free cities, especially in these times. And although you might not guess it to look at me, shipping foodstuffs is rather in my line.”

“Oh, you hail from the free cities, then? Naturally, it would be my pleasure.”

“Thank you. Wait just a moment. Now, where did I put it?” I said, fishing in my breast pocket.

I’d better write this down so that I don’t forget.

When I failed to immediately find what I sought, Lydia smoothly produced a pen and notepaper and handed them to me. “Here.”

“Thank you.” I bowed to Paolo. “Please proceed.”

“Well then,” he began, “tonight’s tea is a rarity from the Principality of Folonto, one of our league’s member states. Although the city of water has many hotels, I may say with confidence that only this one can serve it to you. The sugar used in your dessert is the very best that the Principality of Rondoiro has to offer, paired with superb milk from the Principality of Carnien.”

“Folonto, Rondoiro, and Carnien are all in the south, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, sir. I see that you are well acquainted with our geography.”

The league consisted of five principalities in the north, six in the south, and its political center, the city of water. The shadow of war had not been terribly apparent in the view from our gondola, but if the city’s chefs were turning entirely to southern ingredients, then things might be starting to break down behind the scenes.

Atra stood up on her chair, her ears and tail twitching. Light shone from atop distant masts as a medium-sized sailing vessel—a warship, by the look of it—put in at an islet near the mouth of the Grand Canal. The city’s sailors were renowned for skills that rivaled those of the southern isles. But while I didn’t doubt their prowess at sea, would even these master mariners risk navigating the many shoals of the city’s harbor at night?

While I pondered the significance of what I saw, Atra beamed at me and said, “Boat! Allen?”

“You may go take a closer look at it,” I replied. “Lydia.”

“All right.” Lydia rose and led the jubilant child away by the hand. For a fraction of a second, we exchanged a significant glance.

I might be reading too much into things, but I can’t help worrying.

“You have a lovely wife and a charming daughter,” Paolo remarked as he cleared the table.

“Thank you,” I said. “May I make a few requests of you?”

“Anything you like, sir.”

Atra was exclaiming over the sailing ship while Lydia watched over her. I could see those two lady guests bringing their heads together and conversing in hushed voices as they observed the pair.

Our most pressing need is for information.

“In that case, would you deliver the local newspapers to my room?” I asked the aging manager. “Starting with today’s issues and continuing for the duration of our stay. Even just the major papers will do. Also, is it too soon to send our laundry for cleaning?”

“Please present whatever you would like washed when you receive the papers,” he replied. “Our laundry staff are of the first water.”

I’ll send out my robe at once. After mom and Caren mended it for me, I want to take good care of it.

I checked that Lydia wasn’t on her way back yet, then whispered, “Finally, your choicest wine, if you please. I’d like to share it with her while we look out on the city at night.”

“Have no fear, sir,” the manager readily acquiesced. “I’ll fetch something from our special reserve.”

What an obliging gentleman.

Atra ducked under the table and let out an exuberant note as she sprang into my lap.

“Welcome back,” I said.

“What were you talking about?” Lydia asked, returning shortly behind her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the lady guests leave their table and walk inside. Was it me, or did the bird-clan woman’s mana resemble that odd flicker I had sensed in our room?

Her Highness opted to take the seat beside me rather than return to her own.

“I was just arranging to have some laundry done,” I replied.

“Paolo, we’d like to start seeing the sights tomorrow. Would you mind suggesting a few stops for our itinerary?”

“Why, I—” Paolo hesitated, then swelled with pride. “Certainly, sir. I was born and raised in the city of water, and I have lived my adult life here as well. You may expect my recommendations in written form shortly. Do you have a particular interest in any part of our fair city?”

“Let me think... I’d love to visit the Grand Library!”

The vast archive on Library Island in the north of the city was said to rival the one that the kingdom had lost to fire during the War of the Dark Lord.

“But we won’t stop there long,” Lydia added with emphasis.

“I... I realize that.” I avoided her gaze by seating Atra on my lap

and starting to untangle the child's hair. Given my history of abandoning Lydia to immerse myself in library books at both the Royal Academy and the university, I didn't fancy my chances arguing this particular point.

"Oh, and Cat Alley," I said. "I hear it's the oldest and least orderly market in the city. As for a gondolier, I'd like to request Suzu of the otter clan, if possible."

Paolo looked taken aback, then nodded vigorously. "Otter-clan gondoliers are remarkable for their skill, even among the ranks of this city's boatmen. We shall make all necessary arrangements. Permit me to congratulate you on your powers of discernment. Also, Cat Alley is a popular destination, but in my long experience, you are the first guest ever to express such prompt interest in the Grand Library."

Am I really that unusual?

"And what about you, Lydia?" I asked the scarlet-haired noblewoman who was currently glowering at Atra.

"Huh?"

"Where would you like to go?" I repeated.

"Let me think," she answered slowly. Then she poured herself a glass of ice water and took a sip.

Wait, is she nervous?

I was still trying to make sense of her reaction when, without meeting my gaze and without expressing emotion, she said, "I'd like to see the Old Temple."

"Since when have you been interested in ancient ruins?" I asked, nonplussed.

The Old Temple stood quietly beside the assembly hall on the city's central island, or so I had heard. No one knew when it had been built or by whom. Only one fact about the building was certain: it was the oldest structure in the city of water. And although it was only open to the public on select occasions, none of the travelers' accounts I'd read mentioned anything remarkable about it.

My partner polished off her ice water, set down her glass, and glared. "What?" she demanded. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"I didn't say there was. But...I'd like to see it too."

"Just as I thought. I wouldn't expect anything more from you!"

"I see," I said slowly, stifling any further questions as I stroked Atra's head—to the child's audible delight.

The temple certainly piqued my interest. And Lydia said that she wanted to go. What could matter more than that?

"Certainly, ma'am," the manager said, with a reverent bow. "I, Paolo Solevino, shall see to it."



“Outside Atlasian, Bazelian capitals, standoff with enemy forces continues”

“After returning to own domain, Marchesa Rondoiro petitions assembly in writing, urges immediate peace with kingdom”

“Marchese Carnien in address to assembly: peace would jeopardize league’s honor”

“Doge Pisani and Deputy Nitti in days of closed-door meetings”

Upon my return from the large hotel baths, I took a seat on the sofa and towed off my hair while I perused the local papers that Paolo had delivered. I wore a slightly oversize yukata—a pleasantly breathable product of the southern capital. Lydia really had thought of everything.

She must have had her sights set on the city of water all along, the sly devil.

I poured myself a cup of ice water from a glass bottle on the round side table and folded up the newspapers. Public opinion in the league was divided, it seemed, between hawks and doves. But why was the southern Marchese Carnien in the former camp? The six southern principalities had had a fear of the Leinsters beaten into them over the course of the previous three Southern Wars. That experience probably explained Marchesa Rondoiro’s push for peace. And yet...

“I can’t make heads or tails of this,” I groaned. No one was likely to approach Lydia or me while this state of affairs persisted.

On the other hand, a Nitti is involved.

I chuckled, recalling a headstrong and hopelessly frank man of that name whom I had known at the Royal Academy. He might not remember me—especially since we had only really spoken once, at my graduation. But I remembered him and the look that he’d worn when he’d unleashed his anger on me. I was still dwelling on it when the bathroom door opened and Atra bolted out, wearing a white nightgown.

“Allen!” the child cried in her musical way, leaping straight at me. I caught her with a towel I’d kept handy for the purpose—she hadn’t even dried her hair yet.

“Here now, you can’t go forgetting to towel off!” I scolded the girl while she happily nuzzled her head against my belly. “Now, sit right there. I’ll dry—”

“I’ll dry Atra,” Lydia interjected, toweling off her own head as she emerged.

I gulped. She wore a decidedly adult negligee, which bared her

shoulders and collarbones despite her jacket. I had to struggle not to stare.

Lydia picked up a chair, set it down in front of me, and sat. “*You’ll* do my hair,” she said, handing me a brush. “Atra, sit on my lap.”

I obeyed in silence—it was unwise to argue on such occasions. Atra likewise did as she was told, tail wagging.

Lydia gave a tiny, ticklish shudder and moan as I gently ran a soft towel over her short scarlet locks. Then, with a combination of wind magic and temperature control, I began to blow them dry.

“Hold your head still, Atra,” Lydia scolded the happily chirping child. “It’s harder to dry you when— Mmm.”

“I wish *you* wouldn’t squirm either, Lydia,” I said.

“Excuse me?!”

“Why are you angry at me?!”

“Meee!” Atra sang.

We went on like that for a while, Lydia drying Atra’s hair while I tended to hers. Soon, I began to hear small, rhythmic breaths.

“Is Atra asleep?” I asked, keeping my voice low so as not to wake her.

“I think so,” Lydia whispered back. “She tired herself out playing in the bath.”

“Okay. I’m done here.”

“Thanks.” Lydia carried Atra to the bed and spread a blanket over her. The child wore a contented smile, and we couldn’t suppress chuckles of our own.

Linaria Etherheart, Twin Heavens, had lingered in that ruin long after her own death to guard Atra—the great elemental Thunder Fox. And she had placed this child in my care. But as I saw it, I didn’t need a reason to protect this innocent little girl.

Lydia and I shared a glance, then touched our index fingers to our lips and moved to the balcony. The wine Paolo had boasted of sat chilling in a vessel of ice water on a small table, along with two slender glasses. The accompaniments included dried fruits and morsels of salted meat.

“Well now,” murmured the willful noblewoman as a lock of her hair rose and swayed happily from side to side.

“Does this humble repast suit milady’s fancy?” I asked theatrically.

“We. Shall. See.” In the moonlight, Lydia twirled to face me with an impish look. “Say...”

“Hm?” I responded, slowly unstoppering the bottle with a corkscrew. The wine was evidently sparkling, so it might have gushed out if I’d pulled the cork all at once.

Lydia approached me with upturned eyes. “What do you think of

my nightgown?"

"It's lovely. Quite lovely," I replied, flustered in spite of myself as her chest entered my view.

Lydia had known me too long to miss the signs. And sure enough, her response was a teasing "Look at my eyes when you say that."

"Have you ever worn that before?"

"It's brand new. Aren't you glad? No need to say anything—I can tell. You should be grateful, you know. No other man gets to see me in my sleepwear. Now, it's time for grown-up talk. You must have a lot of questions, and I'll answer them. Aren't you thankful to have such a kind, thoughtful mistress? Of course, I *will* make you pay me back later—with interest."

"I'd say you owe me too," I quipped, although I could sense that I was at a disadvantage.

With a pop, the cork came free. Fine white foam fizzed pleasantly as I poured the wine, giving one glass to Lydia and taking the other for myself.

"Well, then," I said.

"Yes."

"Cheers," we chorused, bringing our glasses together with a beautiful clink.

Even after my time in the royal capital, the sparkling wine running down my throat was a novel experience.

"My," I murmured, "this is delicious."

"Yes," Lydia agreed. "I see you've learned to show *some* consideration. You always used to neglect me for that blackhearted princess!"

Cheryl, Lydia, and I had spent just one year together at the Royal Academy—albeit the fullest year of our lives. The first princess, a duke's daughter, and a wolf-clan adoptee. Our threads should never have intertwined, but for that time, they assuredly had.

"That strikes me as a false accusation," I retorted.

"Oh? Do you think you can talk your way out of this one? I have plenty of evidence."

"This is just a shot in the dark, but I suspect Cheryl would say the same thing."

"Excuse me?! What's to choose between me and that royal schemer?! Your top priority—"

"Is Caren, the cutest little sister in the whole wide world, of course. Or should it be my students now?"

"Drop. Dead," Lydia chirped as she sat down across from me, raising a hand to keep her hair neat and crossing her legs.

I wonder where this vintage comes from? It tastes incredible. Once we're at peace, I must talk to Felicia about having the company—

A pinch on the cheek derailed my plans.

"You were just thinking about another girl, weren't you?" Lydia demanded. "Felicia, perhaps?"

"P-Perish the thought."

How did she know?

"You never change," Lydia groaned, resting her head on one hand and fixing me with a disgruntled glare. "But none of that tonight. Tell me, who are you looking at right now?"

After a slight pause, I ventured, "Lady Lydia Leinster."

"No. Try again."

I wrestled with myself. Atra was the only other person in our room, so I had no eavesdroppers to fear. And yet...

I waved my hands, casting the most potent sound-dampening spells in my arsenal. Then I turned to the waiting scarlet-haired beauty.

"My w-wife," I managed. "L-Lydia Alvern."

The embarrassment proved greater than I'd imagined. Unable to endure its assault, I drained my glass.

"Oh, yes? And what have we here? Hm?" A delighted smirk spread across Lydia's face and didn't stop until she was grinning from ear to ear. "Your face is bright red, *my dear husband*. And before you say anything, remember that I'm well within my rights. I trust you haven't forgotten that message you sent me in the southern capital. Well, I hope you rue it now!"

I groaned. During the rebellion, I had indeed dispatched Sir Ryan Bor of the royal guard to tell her "If you try to follow me in death, I'll hate you for it." Although I'd known that the message would wound her, I had also feared what she might do in her desperation. After all, my partner—Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, renowned throughout the west of the continent—was also an ordinary girl on the cusp of turning eighteen.

Lydia cupped her chin in her hands and dangled her feet. "Ah, I feel wonderful," she said, with a musical giggle. "What a lovely night for—"

The breeze picked up, and an adorable sneeze cut her remarks short.

"You remind me of a little girl sometimes," I teased. "Would you like to put on another layer?"

"Quiet, you. And no, thank you. I'm fine."

Just then, Lydia held her hair against a gust of night wind. I gasped as the moonbeams washed over her. We had been inseparable ever since our first meeting, yet perhaps familiarity had blinded me. Of all the people in all the world, this more grown-up Lydia was the most...

“...Beautiful.”

A startled squawk escaped her.

Oh no! I said that out loud!

“Wh-What?” Lydia demanded, leaning over the table. “What did you just say?! Could you repeat that?! Allen!”

“Oh, er... N-Not so loud, my lady. You’ll wake Atra,” I said, trying desperately to cover my slip. My heart couldn’t stand up to speaking my feelings too often.

“That is important. But right now, nothing on earth matters more to me than catching every word out of your—”

Another charming sneeze. The night breeze seemed to be rising, and the moon hid itself in clouds.

“I think I’ll fetch you another layer after all,” I said, rising and turning back into the room.

Lydia followed, her fingers clasping my left sleeve. “Honestly! Would it kill you to give me a frank compliment once in a while?”

“I’d say I do quite a bit of that.”

“Not nearly enough!”

“You know, anyone who’s only experienced your gallant public persona would be appalled to see you now.”

“Ha! That doesn’t bother me, and it won’t affect my life one bit,” Lydia retorted. Despite her haughty words, a wheedling note was creeping into her voice. Cheryl always said that I was too soft on Lydia, and she might have had a point.

“Not that one,” Lydia cut in as I reached for the jacket she’d worn that day. “I’d rather wear this.” She held my robes, which Paolo had returned. I couldn’t guess what magic he had used, but he had somehow finished laundering them while I was in the bath.

“They don’t smell like you,” murmured the young woman with her face buried in the garment. “That’s a minus.”

“D-Don’t sniff them! Caren doing that is already bad enough.”

But Lydia paid no heed to my protest as she slipped into the robes. Then she moved closer and embraced me without another word.

Silence.

While I stroked her back, she looked up into my eyes, smiled, and said, “Have you gotten a little taller again?”

I considered it. “Maybe? I can’t be sure.”

“You have.” Lydia giggled, happily toying with my hair. She had been taller than me at the Royal Academy, and that hadn’t changed for a long time.



I pulled away from her slightly. "By the way..."

"Hm?"

"Did you really need to make such an overblown speech to my mom and dad?"

Lydia had declared her resolve to them in the eastern capital, promising to keep me safe and begging their permission to remain with me.

"Was that wrong of me?" she murmured, closing her eyes and resting her head on my chest.

"No, I wouldn't say that," I admitted.

"I hadn't gotten to see them in so long, and I'd just made a bit of a mess of things."

"Just 'a bit'?"

"D-Don't tease me!" Lydia fumed, pouting.

"Sorry. Go on."

She stared at me intently. "You see, I..."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to put my feelings and my determination into words. And I wanted your mother and father to hear them. I know how much they both mean to you." Her powerful emotions found expression in a whirl of dazzling plumes of pale fire.

"Lydia," I said, aware that I had repeated this point more times than I could remember, "you're the Lady of the Sword, but you're still a young lady first and foremost. *I'll* protect *you*."

"You've already saved me more times than I can count," she responded, moving closer and touching her forehead to mine. "So I want to save you too. I want to keep you safe and hold you and have you all to myself and stay just like this forever." She looked up, blushing slightly. "And I want to kiss you. And for you to kiss me."

"All right," I murmured unsteadily. Her offensive was striking me in merciless waves even as her sweet scent tickled my nose. I began to close my eyes.

Then Atra turned over in bed. The reminder of her presence left us both a little calmer.

"I'd say that you've done more than your fair share of saving," I said.

"And you always pay me back double," Lydia countered.

"Shall we go back outside?"

"Yes."

With Lydia dressed in my robes, we returned to the balcony hand in hand. No sooner had I sat down than she whined, "Scooch over," and forced herself in beside me.

"Seriously?" I groaned.

“Wrong answer!”

Once we shared a chair, jostling shoulder to shoulder, Lydia laughed and hummed merrily as she sipped her wine.

“May we speak seriously?” I asked flatly, tilting back my own glass.

“Yes. I take it you’ve already realized why we’re here,” she replied, a shrewd note entering her voice. “Intelligence agents of many nations and their associates frequent this hotel. According to Maya, the old coin I gave to Paolo identified us as two more of them. So word of us should have reached the most important ears in the city by now.”

Maya? Oh, the maid with chestnut-brown hair who saw us off in the royal capital.

“No one who fails to recognize me is worth worrying about,” Lydia continued, indicating her scarlet hair. “A blunder like that would prove that the league’s internal intelligence services have declined even more than we thought. It would also be cause to reconsider our peace terms—and make them harsher. After all, my family are firm believers in beating our enemies senseless while they’re down.”

I pulled a face and fed her a raisin. Despite the late hour, small craft still thronged the Grand Canal. At last, I said, “What an awful tradition.”

“It’s a little late for cold feet. Besides, I’d wager that the league would like whatever you’re thinking up even less.”

“You overestimate—”

“I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

Stymied, I tried again. “Allow me to—”

“Don’t try to argue.”

I closed my eyes, drank my wine, and put my thoughts in order. “The city seems to be split between hawks and doves. Doge Pisani and Deputy Nitti’s ongoing meetings show that even they have yet to reach a consensus, and it goes without saying that public opinion is also divided. This doesn’t *feel* like a city at war.”

“I guess every country is more or less the same,” Lydia mused.

“The kingdom is rather unique, if you ask me,” I said dryly.

“Highnesses’ included.” No other nation would accord its ducal houses such political power, let alone military might.

“You’re right that the Leinsters will never lose in battle,” I continued, “although you could still lose the war. Once your main force returns from the royal capital and redeploys on the front line, you have a real chance of seizing not only Atlas and Bazel, but all five northern principalities and even the city of water as well.” Almost as an afterthought, I added, “Not that I expect you to try, given the strain

that would put on your logistical headquarters in the southern capital.”

The kingdom was currently locked in a standoff with the Knights of the Holy Spirit on our eastern border. The enemy force I’d faced on the Four Heroes Sea had included Lalannoyan troops. And although we had concluded peace with the Yustinian Empire, we couldn’t afford to relax our northern defenses. Had the church’s “Saint” thought this far ahead?

“I was able to get some idea of conditions in the league from the air on our way here,” I said, snacking on a dried fig. “The roads were all right, but their rail system is in disrepair. Even allowing for sea routes, I’m confident that would cause serious problems if you were to annex the northern principalities. And considering the number of ships in the city of water, the league still has strength to spare. We can’t afford to have the Leinsters tied down while the balance of power on our half of the continent is in flux. Therefore—”

“A swift peace is our wisest course, even if it comes without territory,” Lydia cheerfully preempted my conclusion.

I shrugged. “I really think that *you* should be our contact for negotiations, Lady Lydia Leinster. You were the head of our class, remember?”

Her response was a sullen, “No.”

“Oh, honestly.”

“And I wasn’t the head of our class.”

“What are you talking about? You graduated from the Royal Academy *and* university at— Ow!”

Lydia gave my left arm a playful nibble. “That,” she growled accusingly, “only happened because *someone* forced it on me.”

As the headmaster told it in retrospect, I had graduated from the Royal Academy with the best grades in our class, with Lydia coming in second and Cheryl, third. But prejudice in the royal capital remained strong, and awarding the highest honors to an orphan taken in by the wolf clan might, in the worst case, have sparked a movement against all beastfolk in the city. Thus, the title had gone to Lydia. I had originally been slated to graduate third in the class, but Cheryl had had other ideas. With characteristic obstinacy, Her Royal Highness had insisted on deferring her graduation so that she could study abroad in the city of water.

“That hurts!” I yelped again. “Stop biting me!”

Lydia did as I asked. But after a sullen silence, she fumed, “Humph! Meanie! Bully! That sort of thing is out of style, you know?! First you get a ring from some mystery woman and then, as if that weren’t bad enough, you add a bracelet from Lily!”

How many times had she brought up the offending jewelry? It

must really have rankled her.

"I think that Lily meant the bracelet to double as insurance," I said, refilling our empty glasses. "You know how much she loves you."

"Well, you have a point there." Lydia predictably faltered. She and her cousin were close, whatever she let on. "But aren't you being too soft on her, even if she is older and long-haired?"

"I d-don't approve of your insinuation."

I don't think I've ever declared a preference for older girls with long hair.

"You've got a girl who's older than you right here," Lydia said sulkily, nudging her head against my shoulder. "And I'll grow my hair out again."

"I think you look lovely with short hair too."

"But I'd be 'more your type' if I grew it longer, wouldn't I?"

Such were the words I had used to tease Lydia about her then short hair in the midst of our Royal Academy entrance exam. She had been growing it out ever since.

I sighed. "I really am no match for you."

"Of course not," she replied. "You should have realized that four years ago."

The scarlet-haired beauty stood, took a few steps forward, and turned around. "I found you and caught you," she declared, almost as if uttering a prayer. "Me, Lydia Leinster! Not the scheming princess or my thieving cousin or our stubborn Saint Wolf or my cheeky sister-in-law or Tiny! So I won't give you up, and I won't be beaten!" A pause followed. Then, in a softer voice, she added, "This whole mess made me realize that all over again."

Her head drooped and her voice began to tremble. This was Lydia the crybaby—a side of herself that she revealed only to me.

"You see, I found out that I'm so much more possessive than even I thought, and that I'm too weak to walk on my own. So... So please..." She looked up and stared straight at me, her eyes dewed with tears. "Never... Never leave me again. As long as you're with me, I'll go anywhere—to purgatory or the frozen hell or the ends of the earth!"

After hearing that, I suppose I can't keep wavering.

I rose and joined the trembling young woman, then took her hands in mine. "Lydia."

"Allen?"

"You know, this is enemy territory," I said casually—and forged a shallow mana link.

Lydia's eyes widened. "What?"

"I'll keep us linked while we're in the city," I said rapidly, avoiding her gaze. "It feels a bit safer this way, don't you think? I mean, we'll be ready to meet any surprise attacks."

As an unfortunate side effect of excessive linking, the mana circuit between us was becoming permanent. That opened the door to a constant connection. Actually maintaining one, however, would accelerate the circuit's growth and make it easier for me to draw on Lydia's mana—something that I avoided...and which she had always wished for.

The stunned young woman buried her face in my chest. "Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable. You big dolt," she muttered, her hot tears leaving splotches on my yukata. Then, almost too soft to hear, "Thank you. I'm yours, you hear?"

I kept tenderly stroking her back.

"Now, let's decide where we'll go tomorrow," I suggested, drying Lydia's eyes. "If we don't need to bother with the nitty-gritty of negotiations, then we ought to make the most of our time here. The Old Temple is at the top of your list, right?"

Lydia gave a bashful shake of her head and murmured, "Not yet. We can save that for later."

"What? But you said—"

"It! Can! Wait! Now, back to drinking!"

"As you wish." Although I still had questions, I allowed the noblewoman to guide me.



"You're certain, then, Paolo?"

"Yes, sir," I answered the young man, who refused to put down his pen even at this hour of the night. He was twenty-four this year, with unassuming spectacles and pale-blue hair somewhat on the long side. Despite the keen glint in his eyes, his fatigue was readily apparent, and his fine clothes were rumpled.

The House of Nitti was among the first families in the league, and we were closeted in a chamber of their residence on the city's central island. I was here to report not in my public capacity as a hotel manager, but in my private capacity as an intelligencer in the Nittis' direct employ.

"The name 'Alvern' is surely a deception," I said. "Unless I miss my guess, we are dealing with Lady Lydia Leinster, also called the Lady of the Sword. Her house withdrew their embassy following the outbreak of hostilities, yet now they have sent us their duke's own daughter. Don Niche, could this be the overture of peace it appears?"

"Not necessarily." The young man—Don Niche Nitti, eldest son of his house—looked up, his face marked by profound care and exhaustion. "Don't judge the Lady of the Sword by her looks. She could reduce our city to a sea of flames single-handedly if she felt so inclined. You must have heard what happened at Avasiek—although

many in the assembly pretend they haven't."

One and a half months previously, at the outset of this war, the armies of Atlas and Bazel had faced the kingdom's Ducal House of Leinster on the Avasiek Plain...and suffered a historic defeat—a foretaste of the lightning-quick invasion to which both principalities now found themselves subjected. In that battle, it was said, a lone devil had overrun their headquarters and shattered their troops' morale with a single spell. I had discounted the tale as battlefield gossip, and I would certainly never have associated it with that merry girl.

"At the same time, the Leinsters are no fools," Don Niche continued, removing his spectacles. "They must be considering both war and peace. Now, who has the Lady of the Sword brought with her? Surely not even she would come here alone."

"A young man who calls himself Allen and a young fox-clan girl," I replied. "I don't believe they are actually her husband and daughter, but I suspect they are formidable."

Levitation was notoriously difficult to control, and a sorcerer who performed the feat so easily was not to be underestimated. The reaction of the young man before me, however, surpassed anything that I had anticipated. The ever-composed Don Niche—called the "Cold Razor of the Nittis"—was stunned.

"What?" he demanded haltingly. "Allen? Did you say Allen?!"

"I-Is something the matter?" I asked, disarranging my hair in my agitation. There seemed to be more gray in it than there had been when the war began—perhaps a sign of its mental toll.

"Things couldn't be worse! Or could this be the best thing for the league? That man could secure peace in..."

"I don't quite follow you, sir." As skilled as that young fellow might be, I found it hard to imagine that he could merit such distress from Don Niche.

After taking a moment to compose himself, the young man replied, "I presume you know that I studied at the Wainwright Kingdom's Royal Academy?"

"Yes, sir." The Royal Academy was the finest institute of learning in the west of our continent. Merely obtaining admission to it was a feat.

Don Niche opened a drawer, extracted a bottle, and gulped down its contents—stomach medicine, I presumed. "That place was quite literally a den of monsters," he said. "Between the Lady of the Sword and the Lady of Light, I lost count of how many times I was overwhelmed by an unanswerable difference in talent."

Although Don Niche currently oversaw his house's internal affairs while his father served in the demanding position of deputy, he had

begun his career as a promising sorcerer. And yet even he had felt overwhelmed?

“And one monster stood out head and shoulders above the rest,” he spat as he set down the bottle, his face twisted in hatred...and faint yet unmistakable awe. “The ‘Brain of the Lady of the Sword,’ Allen of the wolf clan.”

“Impossible!” I blurted out. “You mean he truly exists?”

More than once, I had heard rumors that the Lady of the Sword kept a “Brain” at her side. Yet not even the league’s intelligencers had ever succeeded in obtaining more definite information.

Don Niche folded his hands on his desk and solemnly declared, “The end of this war will be stormy, although perhaps not in the way that Marchese Carnien and his coconspirators from the Church of the Holy Spirit hope. Marchesa Rondoiro and the other major proponents of peace are marshaling their forces as well. Paolo, if anything happens—”

“I will report to you at once, sir.”

“Please do. Oh, and as for my brother...”

“Young Don Niccolò?”

Niccolò Nitti was Deputy Nitti’s second son and Don Niche’s brother, albeit many years younger and by a different mother. Despite possessing astonishing reserves of latent mana, he was a sickly boy and rarely left the premises. When he did go out, it was almost always to the library. The daughter of the family steward—my elder brother, Toni Solevino—served as his attendant.

Don Niche hesitated. “No, it’s nothing. Forget it.”

“Sir.”

Don Niche spoke not another word in my presence. It appeared that both the League of Principalities and the House of Nitti were plagued with many problems.

Chapter 2

“Wait! Stop, Allen of the wolf clan!”

The cry brought me up short one early-spring day just as I left the Royal Academy by its massive front gate, my graduation ceremony over and done with. There was no one around. Looking behind me, I saw a man with pale-blue hair, on the long side, wearing a school uniform and sober spectacles. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his shoulders heaved as he gasped for breath—a far cry from his usual intellectual air. He was also missing his beret.

“Niche Nitti?” I asked. “Can I help you?”

My pursuer had been in my year when I’d first enrolled, although I had then joined a scarlet-haired noblewoman and blonde princess in skipping several, so we had hardly ever spoken.

“...y?” he panted.

“I beg your pardon. I couldn’t quite hear you,” I replied, my mind on the stop behind me, where a carriage belonging to the Ducal House of Leinster stood waiting. Unless I made this quick, Lydia would come looking for me.

Niche caught his breath, raised his head, and glared at me. “Why?!” he demanded. “Why didn’t you graduate at the head of your class?! I won’t deny that Duke Leinster’s daughter is brilliant—no one could dispute that. But... But surely—*surely*—the highest honors should be yours!”

I blinked, genuinely stunned to discover that I had an admirer among the student body apart from Lydia, Cheryl, and the late Zelbert Régnier. Then I cracked a grin and said, “You overestimate me. Even graduating second in my class is more than I deserve.”

“Hogwash! A man of your caliber must realize what a feat it is to graduate from the Royal Academy in only a single year—and what the difference between placing first or second will mean for your future! It’s still not too late. Speak to the headmaster and demand—”

“Forgive me,” I interjected, “but I have an engagement to keep. Please try to be brief.”

I was one of the lowly houseless—without even a surname—and an adopted member of the wolf clan, at that. My graduating at the head of the class would cause a scandal. And given the current state of the kingdom, that might spell disaster.

Niche gnashed his teeth so loudly that I could hear it and fixed me

with a wrathful stare. “Listen,” he said, “because I’ll only say this once! Allen of the wolf clan, I want you to—”



That dream takes me back.

“And here I’d completely forgotten about that graduation ceremony...” I murmured. Reading the name “Nitti” in the papers last night must have jogged my memory.

I slowly opened my eyes, and tangled scarlet hair filled my view. Its owner giggled. “Allen.”

Lydia was sound asleep with Atra. She was also wearing one of my white shirts, although she hadn’t been when we had turned in the previous night.



“When did she find the time?” I wondered aloud. Was it me, or did Lydia, Caren, and most recently Stella regard my shirts as sleepwear? I would need to speak with her about that later.

I slowly got out of bed and retrieved my pocket watch from the end table. Despite all the traveling that we’d done, it told the correct time. Beside it lay Lydia’s watch and a brand-new video orb.

Hm?

With a sense of creeping dread, I confiscated the orb for the time being.

Atra’s ears and tail gave the occasional twitch. Perhaps she was dreaming. She hadn’t reverted to her fox-cub form since we’d fled the royal capital. The stable mana supply that she now received through Lydia might explain that, but so could the overflowing light that she’d absorbed from Stella in the eastern capital. Which was it, I wondered?

After watching the pair sleep for a few moments, I moved to the washstand. If I made the least noise, Lydia would snap awake and drag me back to bed for more sleep. And her sleeping in wouldn’t stop there—she might even spend all day cooped up in our room. And as fun as that could be, it wouldn’t be fair to Paolo, who had looked into tourist spots on our behalf.

After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I went out on the balcony for a bit of light exercise. Although the previous night’s view had been spectacular, the sight of the city sunk in morning mist was also breathtaking in its own way. Despite the early hour, countless skiffs and gondolas were already plying the Grand Canal, while seabirds soared overhead. The rays of the rising sun reflected off white and orange brickwork, coloring the water’s surface. The dedicated craftsmanship that had gone into roofs and decorations contributed to the pleasant cityscape, redolent of the breath of life.

I recalled a passage from a famous traveler’s account: “A view of the city of water at night is worth a thousand gold pieces. At the break of day, ten thousand.” Sure enough, this was a sight worth traveling for.

Leaving the video orb on the table, I began my morning practice. Over and over again, I cast separate elementary spells of all eight elements—fire, water, earth, wind, lightning, ice, light, and darkness. Silence was my primary focus; it wouldn’t do to wake the sleeping beauties.

How had maintaining a link with Lydia affected my casting? It hadn’t, particularly. The extremely shallow depth of the connection doubtless played a role in that, but I might also have been adjusting to the act of linking with someone else’s mana.

Should I research my ability at the Grand Library? In any case, I

should try to avoid using Lydia's mana except in emergencies.

Having made that silent decision, I moved on to my next exercise. I deployed formulae of water, wind, light, and darkness, repeatedly stopping just short of manifesting silver-snow. Linaria's enchanted rod, Silver Bloom, had yet to fully recover its mana, and my own personal reserves would never suffice to activate the spell. Nevertheless, I would be able to teach Tina the knack of it when I returned to the kingdom.

While deploying a formula for silver-snow with my right hand, I used my left to fiddle with one that remained far from complete: that colossal fiery serpent covered in spines and bearing bladed wings. Although I was working with my simplified version, the spell still proved exceptionally challenging. I could do no more with it at present.

"And this is *after* I toned it down to a level where I can just barely activate it," I groaned, feeling the gulf between Linaria's prowess and my own. Personality issues aside, that witch had been brilliant beyond measure.

The ring on the third finger of my right hand flickered with light. Perhaps that was her way of saying, "Naturally!"

I could never hope to equal Lydia, Tina, Caren, Ellie, Lynne, my former underclassmen from the university, or Stella (who progressed at an astonishing pace). Yet I felt determined to see what they would become, so my only path was to keep forging ahead.

Exactly! I'll push myself a little harder and—

"Hm?"

I felt as though I were being watched. But our room was on the top floor, and there was no one in sight—only seabirds on the wing. Had I imagined—

A tug on my left sleeve drew my attention to Atra, groggy but awake. Her long white hair was tangled from sleep.

"Good morning," I said. "Did I wake you?"

Shaking her head, the child smiled and held out her hands to me. I picked her up and went back inside.

Lydia was still asleep, mumbling, "Unbelievable. We're going to the city of water, you hear me?"

Yes, we're finally here.

I raised my index finger to my lips, shushing Atra. Then I brought the happy child to the washstand, where I perched her on a low stool and helped her to clean her face with cold water. Her ears and tail bristled, and her eyes opened wide. Evidently, she was now fully awake.

"Atra, say 'aah.'"

She looked puzzled for a moment, then obediently opened her

mouth, so I brushed her teeth. Although she acted ticklish at first, we got through it without incident.

Atra turned to look at me with eyes that said, "Are we done now?"

Not quite yet.

I dampened her hair with a water spell, then set about fixing her bed head with one of the hotel combs. She kicked her feet, evidently enjoying this immensely. Once her hair was neat, I tied it with her violet ribbon for the finishing touch.

"There!" I said. "Now you look lovely."

With a short, musical cry, Atra bounded off the stool and straight at me. She clung on, nuzzling her head against me.

"H-Hey, that tickles! Cut it—"

I gasped. A hostile presence at my back! I spun around, putting Atra behind me...and said, "G-Good morning, Lydia."

Her Highness had risen at last. In her left hand, she carried her hairbrushes and other toiletries in a cloth bag emblazoned with a little scarlet bird. "Good morning," she responded. "Say, did you know?"

"Kn-Know what?"

"That everything has its proper order. And the *reasonable* choice would have been to start with *me*."

This beauty had woken in a foul temper. And her hair expressed it every bit as eloquently as Tina's or Lynne's.

Jealous of a child? How immature can she be?

But despite my exasperation, I tapped the stool and said, "Here, have a seat."

"Oh, all right," she grumbled, "although there's nothing 'right' about it!" She sat and handed me her bag, so I began brushing out her bed head.

Atra took a seat too—on Lydia's lap.

"Listen," the childish noblewoman told the child, "I come first. You're second. Understand?"

Atra looked quizzical, then pulled a face.

"What do you mean, you'd 'rather be first'?!"

They must both be morning people.

"Lydia, what would you like to do today?" I asked.

She considered briefly before replying, "We'll play it by ear. I don't care what I do as long as you're with me, so why not spend all day in our room?"

"Out of the question."

"Humph! You're no fun!"

"Don't kick your legs like that—you're not a child. Would you like me to put in a hair clip?"

One sullen silence later, Lydia muttered, "Suit yourself."

I took a clip from the bag and threaded it into a tuft of hair near the front of her head. I had given her this one during our Royal Academy days, and I felt glad that she'd kept it, even though it hadn't cost much.

"Hm..." Lydia mused, studying herself in the mirror. "I see your tastes haven't changed, and not just when it comes to long hair."

"I still don't like how you phrase that," I responded. "So, you still have this old hair clip. You know..."

"What?"

I hesitated. "It's time for breakfast. Brush your own teeth, then get dressed and— Wah!"

Lydia seized me and leapt into bed so quickly that I didn't even get a chance to struggle—although I *did* manage to place a levitation spell on Atra. My heart rate spiked alarmingly as I glimpsed Lydia's pristine white undergarments peeking out from her neckline.

What a waste of strength and magic!

Lydia landed astride me, pinning me down even as she murmured a beguiling "Tell me."

"I... I invoke my right to remain silent."

"You lost that a long time ago. Now, what were you about to say?"

After a tense pause, I ventured, "I object to this tyrannical court."

This position won't do. It's disastrous—both for me and for Atra's education. So needs must.

I reached up and touched Lydia's cheek. Her hand immediately covered mine. Rising slightly, I whispered in her ear, "I was just thinking that you look lovely in anything."

Lydia froze, blushing bright red. Then she toppled onto me, giggling, and said, "Silly."

An agitated Atra dispelled the levitation herself and dropped onto the bed. After plopping herself down, she clung to me and closed her eyes. I supposed that she was still sleepy after all.

"By the way, I found a video orb," I said, running my fingers through scarlet hair.

"It's mine," Lydia replied. "As for what's on it, I invoke my right to remain silent."

"You have one and I don't?! How is that fair?!"

"What did you expect? I *am* your mistress."

As we exchanged our usual banter, I discovered that her hair had been sloppily cut.

"You ought to even up these ends soon," I said. "And—"

"Don't apologize!" she snapped before I could say more. "Have you forgotten what I said yesterday? Don't leave me anymore. If you go somewhere, take me with you. Never leave me alone again...and

I'll forgive you."

"And will you give me any time to myself?"

"No. Together, you and I are unbeatable. Now give me back my orb—I caught the cutest view of your sleeping face on it."

"You mean you got up ahead of me, made off with one of my shirts, and recorded me while you were at it?! Craven! Poltroon!"

"Silly. Don't you know that the winners write the history books?"

First thing in the morning and we were already teasing each other over nothing. I was so glad to feel as though life had finally returned to normal. And Lydia shared my sentiments, if her laughter was any indication.

Whatever the future held, I would have nothing to fear while she was with me. And after the string of difficult battles we'd overcome, I thought we deserved a little breather. For one day, at least, we would enjoy our vacation in the city of water.



Atra sat on my right, letting out little yips of approval as she wolfed down an omelet with gusto. Her eye level was only a little lower than Lydia's and mine, courtesy of a child seat that the staff must have provided with us in mind. Our breakfast itself had been prepared with equal care.

What marvelous service.

The Water Dragon Inn's rooftop terrace was as sparsely populated this morning as it had been the night before. A man in the prime of life soon left, and only the now-familiar pair of women arrived to replace him. The waitstaff also seemed to have plenty of time on their hands. According to Paolo, who had shown us to our table himself, peace negotiations with the kingdom were proving difficult, causing a steep decline in foreign tourists. Turmoil in the northern principalities was another major factor, as it tied down the wealthy northern merchants who usually frequented the hotel.

"This is no time for any of them to be visiting our fair city," the manager had said. "Most are busy being hounded for explanations now that the people have learned how they used the conflict as a pretext to hoard wheat and other necessities of life. The scandal has ruined some businesses. Even those merchants who were not implicated are too occupied restoring order to travel. And I need hardly say that the same holds true for those in power. My word, but we have chosen a dreadful opponent to antagonize."

Picking a fight with the Ducal House of Leinster certainly wasn't anywhere on *my* to-do list. I couldn't even handle Lydia, who was sitting on the other side of Atra from me. If Lisa joined the fray, or Anna and her maid corps...

Still, something didn't sit right with me. The Leinsters' talents weren't confined to the battlefield. Even the young noblewoman dressed in pale scarlet whose frequent glances in my direction constituted a demand for more pampering could wage an economic war if she so chose. Yet the tactics that Paolo had described—crushing businesses that tried to profit off the war—didn't seem quite like them. Too merciless, perhaps?

A vision of a certain man-shy head clerk who had evacuated to the southern capital suddenly popped into my mind. Lynne had told me that Felicia was making herself quite useful in the rear echelon. And that under Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster's direct supervision, she and Lady Sasha Sykes were in charge of "analysis and operations within the League of Principalities."

In my mind's eye, a bespectacled, buxom young woman who had gone so far as donning beast ears and a maid uniform tore through desk work at a ferocious pace as she crowed, "As if you couldn't do as much with enough information and funding! In fact, Allen, you'd be way, way more thorough—not to mention meaner—than I am!"

To steady my nerves, I took a sip of tea and turned my attention to the ancient metropolis spread out below me. Even the latest magical vessels, equipped with paddle wheels, traversed its bustling waterways. Open-air shops lined its streets, and people flocked to them for breakfast and to buy fresh seafood, fruits, and vegetables. Nothing about the quotidian scene suggested a nation at war.

So I was right yesterday—the Leinsters may have the upper hand, but the league still has plenty of strength to fall back on.

"Atra, you're making a mess of yourself," I said, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping the child's mouth.

Atra sounded delighted, but the willful noblewoman seated on the other side of her gave me a sullen glare—a cry for attention, unless I missed my guess.

I tore a piece of bread, dipped it in my soup—in which the fish stock came through beautifully—and proffered it to Lydia. She gobbled it down in a flash, then silently held her mouth open for more. I felt like a mother bird.

Atra cocked her head, puzzled, then opened her own mouth wide in imitation. I could tell that those two women were watching and smiling at us. Of course it had to be the one time I did this in public.

"Look," I said. "You're being a bad influence on Atra again."

"I don't care. Mmm!" Lydia replied, holding out a bite of grilled chicken on her own fork. I ate it while tossing a piece of bread into Atra's mouth. We had been repeating this pattern for some time, although I supposed that the child's inclusion might have made it marginally less embarrassing than usual.

Lydia must have felt satisfied because she started fussing over Atra. For all her childish rivalry, she doted on the little girl.

As the meal neared its end, Paolo arrived, wheeling a cart. On it rested our tea, which—as I'd requested—had yet to be brewed. "My apologies for the delay, sir," he said.

"No, my apologies for the unusual request," I replied.

"It is our pleasure to gratify any desire that our guests may have."

"I appreciate your saying so."

Having finished my breakfast, I set about preparing tea. As it happened, Lydia wasn't fond of drinking tea or coffee out. She would only willingly take it at the café with the sky-blue roof or the tea stalls of the bazaar in the royal capital. But on our way out of the room this morning, she had said, "I'd like a taste of your tea again. It's been so long." I could hardly say no to that.

I steeped the leaves slowly and carefully, then poured until not a drop remained. For Lydia, milk and a pinch of sugar. I took the same and gave Atra an extra helping of both. Then I handed the two girls their cups.

"Thank you very much," I said to Paolo. "This breakfast was as magnificent as last night's dinner."

"I am most gratified to hear you say so, sir. And although it has taken me longer than I had hoped to prepare, here is the information you requested," he replied, placing a beautiful sheet of paper on the table—a precise map of the city, down to its smallest waterways. The chart even included the Old City in the north, which had supposedly been abandoned centuries ago.

Should he really be showing this to foreigners?

Despite my misgivings, Paolo continued nonchalantly, "I also reached out to the gondolier, and she responded, 'With pleasure!'"

It sounded as though the otter-clan girl who had ferried us the day before was quite enthusiastic. I felt certain that Lydia and Atra would enjoy another day with her.

"We truly appreciate it," I said.

"I will inform you as soon as your gondola arrives. Please take your ease until then." As the manager left our table, I saw the women rise from theirs.

I was studying the map when Atra climbed onto my lap and joined in, seemingly full of curiosity. The albatross around my neck took advantage of our newfound isolation to press her chair right up against mine. She then rested her right elbow on the table and her head on her hand. The clip in her hair caught the light.

Before long, she said, "Hey."

"I've already indulged you more than enough," I replied.

"Not nearly!"

“Was the tea not to your liking?”

“It was lovely,” she admitted, shaking her head and cracking a grin. “Thanks.”

I reached out and touched her bangs. “I’ll bake a treat for you while we’re here.”

“Something I like?” she asked slowly.

“One of your favorites.”

“Oh, really? Well, in that case, I suppose I’ll pardon you. Now, where should we go today? Oh, this café seems nice. According to this, it’s called ‘The Cat Parting the Seas.’” Lydia laughed with a look of boundless curiosity that hadn’t changed in all the time I’d known her. “What a funny name.”

“Then let’s plan to stop there for a break and leave the rest to Suzu.”

“Sure.”

Atra sang a note to signal that she also approved of my proposal.

I must get envelopes and stationery.

I had left the girls a note and some written exercises, but they must still have been growing worried. Given their initiative, I wouldn’t put it past them to set out for the southern capital if they didn’t hear from me. And then... Well, I had better write to them before they stormed all the way to the city of water.



Our gondola glided along a narrow canal. The scents of flowers and cooking wafted from the houses on either side. Atra was sniffing at them from her perch on Lydia’s lap, in the shade of a parasol. Both of them wore matching cloth hats and white dresses.

Looking around, I saw verandas replete with potted plants. The walls and roofs were also painted in vivid hues, which did much to lift my spirits. Suzu, the otter-clan girl plying her oar behind me, seemed just as cheerful.

“The Grand Canal cuts through the whole city from north to south, winding like a snake,” she said. “But as convenient as it is, it also sees a lot of traffic. That’s why we’re taking little-known back channels like this one! They’re narrow and give a view of life in the city, so I usually avoid them when I have passengers. But I couldn’t believe my luck when you asked for me again so soon, so I’m making an exception!”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I should be the one saying thanks! A personal request from the Water Dragon Inn will do wonders for my reputation!” In a more subdued tone, she added, “I really didn’t expect you to ask for a novice like me. It came as such a surprise that I could barely get any

sleep last night. So I'll do my very best to show you around the city today."

Despite her claims of inexperience, Suzu handled her oar with skill, deftly navigating a tight corner. I felt confident that even Dag would praise her.

While I got lost in memories of the old otter in the eastern capital, Lydia spoke up. "You *do* remember where we want to go, right?"

"Certainly, madam! First stop, the Grand Library!" Suzu answered cheerfully. Paolo must have coached her.

I noticed a slight shiver run through Lydia. "Madam," she whispered, giggling to herself. "Madam." She was dangerously close to breaking character.

"The Grand Library has quite a history," the otter-clan girl continued in a singsong. "No one knows when it was built, but I was taught that it's the second-oldest building in the city, after the Old Temple on the main island. Every other collection of its kind has been lost to all the wars that have swept the continent since then. So now a lot of valuable books can't be found anywhere else."

"I look forward to seeing it," I said, grinning from ear to ear. I had always dreamed of visiting the city of water's Grand Library, and I could hardly wait to explore its famously magnificent interior.

"Remember that this won't be our *only* stop," Lydia interjected.

"I... I haven't forgotten." Losing track of time as soon as I opened a book was a bad habit of mine.

The end of this canal came into view.

"Not many visitors ask to see the Grand Library first thing," Suzu remarked. "Even the locals don't use it that often, since you can't get to it by the bridges."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said. After all, the library's collection reputedly consisted entirely of ancient manuscripts, rare tomes, and spell books. Anyone uninterested in those would have more pressing sights to see in this historic metropolis.

"After the library," Lydia cut in, "we'd like to tour Cat Alley and then stop at The Cat Parting the Seas."

"Absolutely!" Suzu replied. "Oh, but The Cat Parting the Seas is on the central island. Civilian gondolas can't dock there, so you'll need to walk over a bridge."

"Hmm..." I unfolded the map that Paolo had given me and studied the cluster of place names around the Grand Canal. Starting from the north, there were the Isle of the Brave, the Grand Library, Seven Dragons Plaza, Cat Alley, the Old Temple, the assembly hall, The Cat Parting the Seas, the Water Dragon Inn, and many more. Merely reading them all was an enjoyment in itself. Lydia and Atra joined in, peering over my shoulders.

“The Grand Library is on the far north side of the city, out of the canal and just this side of the Isle of the Brave,” I mused. “And I believe Cat Alley is over here, a little to the south, on this lone islet beyond the eastern limits of the city proper. Going to The Cat Parting the Seas from there would be...quite a walk. If reaching it by gondola isn’t an option, then we can hardly ask you to accompany us all that —”

“No, that’s all part of my job!” Suzu interrupted with a vigorous shake of her head.

I can respect that she takes pride in her work. Nevertheless...

“Don’t worry,” Lydia said before I could make up my mind.

“Guide us as far as Cat Alley. We’ll go on foot from there.”

“What?! B-But madam...” Suzu floundered. “I mean, I’ve been generously paid, so—”

“You’ll make it up to us with a discount at your grandfather’s curio shop. I trust you don’t object?”

“And there you have it. I hope you can see your way to agreeing,” I said, fully on board with Lydia’s proposal. Her quick decision-making had saved me on more than one such occasion. So, turning to the noblewoman, who was holding her hat down over her scarlet hair, I added, “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“You really do make such a wonderful couple!” Suzu exclaimed, pressing her hands together. “I’m jealous.”

I cleared my throat, but before I could say anything, Lydia responded, “Really, it’s just one thing after another.” Despite her outward composure, I could tell—if not for her hat, that lock of her hair would be standing on end for joy!

Then the gondola passed out of the narrow channel. I gasped, Lydia let out an appreciative “Well,” and Atra made her excitement felt as a stately stone building on a small island came into view before us. Its foundations stood a level higher than the rest of the city’s—doubtless a precaution against waves. Tendrils of ivy climbed the walls of the structure, which resembled the cathedral on a hill west of the royal capital. Since only a few gondolas bobbed at the mooring place, I supposed that it really was as unpopular a destination as we had been led to believe.

Without warning, a gust from the sea blew the hat off Atra’s head and high into the air.

“Whoa there!” I cried, hastily preparing a wind spell. But before I could cast it, a woman in an old-fashioned gondola ahead of us reached out and caught the hat for me. She wore a black dress and an equally dark hat of her own, which obscured her features. Her straw-hatted rower appeared to be a woman as well.

The woman in black turned to me and gestured to the Grand Library. Her long tarnished-silver hair and earring caught the light. Lydia, who had far better eyesight than I did, murmured, "A crescent moon."

"How long has that woman been a gondolier here?" Suzu wondered aloud, perplexed.

"Thank you very much!" I hollered, bowing.

The woman waved her hand as if to say, "Think nothing of it."

Atra was looking downhearted, so I gave her a pat on the head and said, "Don't worry; we'll pick it up when we land. Remember to say thank you, okay?"

The child gave an emphatic nod and beamed.

We approached the Grand Library. Seabirds flitted about, enjoying the sea breeze, which also carried innumerable black and white flower petals.

"Is there a garden on the island?" I asked Suzu.

"Oh, no. The petals come from over there." The otter-clan girl pointed to a farther island with her left hand while expertly maneuvering the gondola with her right. Walls of ivy-clad brick surrounded it on all sides, blocking my view of the interior.

"The Isle of the Brave?"

"Yes." A grave note entered Suzu's sprightly voice as she added, "Those who gave their lives in the War of the Dark Lord are buried there. No one is allowed to live on that island. It's a place for prayer and the repose of souls."



The woman who had caught Atra's hat was waiting for us at the entrance of the Grand Library. Its massive doors made their imposing presence felt, and the building itself was a gorgeous blend of white walls, pale-orange columns, and latticed windows of frosted glass. It looked like something out of a storybook.

Although the woman's hat concealed her eyes, her tall, slim finger drew ours. She was even taller than I was. Her rower was nowhere in sight, having presumably remained with her gondola just as Suzu had.

"Excuse me," I called. "We appreciate your help. Now, Atra, what do you say?"

The child hiding behind my back remained silent.

"I like girls who can say thank you," Lydia coaxed.

Bashfully, Atra approached the woman, then bobbed her little head. The woman flashed a smile, then bent down to place the hat on her.

"Thank goodness it didn't fall," she said, her voice mellow and mature. Perhaps she belonged to one of the long-lived races.

Lydia and I bowed slightly as well.

Light gleamed off the woman's earring when she stood. As Lydia had said, it was in the shape of a crescent moon. I caught a glimpse of deep-silver eyes.

"You travel with unusual *children*, sir," she said. "Please, for your own good, do not linger in the city of water. It is no place to bring a child in wartime."

"Y-You don't say..." I stammered, taken aback by this sudden advice. Lydia folded her arms in silence.

"I have warned you." With that parting remark and a flutter of tarnished-silver locks, the woman entered the library.

Lydia and I exchanged looks.

"Who do you think she was?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Lydia replied. "But I find it hard to believe that she picked up on Atra and this girl without either of them using magic." The scarlet-haired noblewoman peeled the white glove from her right hand, revealing the mark of the great elemental Blazing Qilin.

I suppose the opposition still has people we should be worried about, then. If the danger is imminent, we ought to fall back to the southern capital and—

Lydia gave me a shove on the back. "Think later," she said. "She didn't seem like she meant us harm, and we're keeping Suzu waiting!"

I chuckled. "You really are—"

"What?" Lydia snapped, shooting me a suspicious look.

Rather than finish my sentence with "dependable," I opted to reach out and take her hand with my left. "Come on. Let's go," I said. "Atra, keep hold of Lydia's other hand, okay?"

"Hey, w-wait!" Lydia fumed. But when Atra hopped up, she clasped the child's fingers with her own. "Oh, honestly."

Now, at last, I'm face-to-face with the Grand Library.

Beyond the door lay a world of dreams. I couldn't suppress a drawn-out gasp of wonder. As beautiful as the library's exterior was, it hadn't prepared me for what existed within.

The structure consisted of three floors, with an atrium at the entrance. Everywhere I saw masterful designs in gold paint. And the ancient books that had drawn me here lined every wall, filling bookcases that stretched to the ceiling. I felt so excited I could have jumped for joy.

"You're like a child right now," Lydia unkindly pointed out.

"C-Can you blame me?" I demanded. "I've wanted to come for so long."

"Yes, yes. It looks like you have to sign your name, so put down

mine and Atra's too while you're at it. That's when the clock starts ticking."

I suppressed a sob, stung by this reversal of my usual teasing. I... I had left myself wide open.

"Excuse me," I greeted a librarian—a human man in late middle age—behind a desk near the entrance. "I'd, um, like to browse the collection."

"Welcome," he replied. "Please sign your name here. Are you a tourist? How unusual. But please understand that we can only lend to residents."

I picked up a pen and signed in a notebook with a blue cover. I didn't see the name of the woman who had entered ahead of us. I wondered if she had gone to a different desk as I returned the librarian's pen and said, "It's a shame that such a wonderful library receives so few visitors, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't say that." The librarian flashed a rueful grin, then gestured for me to listen closely. In a whisper, he continued, "When I started this job, my father told me that all the really precious—and dangerous—volumes are stored under the Old Temple. And that we had long since lost any means of sealing them. So while we have a catalog here, nothing of true value remains on this island. Of course, many of our books are fascinating nonetheless."

So that's what they use the temple for.

"Thank you for enlightening me," I replied.

"Consider it a thank-you for traveling all this way. Please enjoy your visit."

When I rejoined my companions, Lydia had her pocket watch out. "No extensions," she said. "We'll be looking around the first floor."

"I... I know."

I pulled out my notes and reviewed my advance reconnaissance of the library's collection. The first and second floors held relatively recent volumes. Those, I could read just as easily in the kingdom. What I really wanted to see were...

"I'll be on the third floor with the oldest books," I told Lydia. "If anything happens—"

"We'll be fine," she interrupted. "But hurry back."

"I will. Atra, keep an eye on Lydia for me."

The child raised her right hand and chirped in cheerful acquiescence. Having struck back at the fuming noblewoman in this small way, I made for the spiral staircase at the back of the room with a spring in my step.

The third floor was practically deserted, no doubt because the oldest books were also the most difficult to decipher. Although the

floors were swept clean, the odor of dust and preservative chemicals was in the air.

“Let me see,” I murmured. “Spell books and medical treatises from before the War of the Dark Lord should be...”

A mountain of problems currently demanded my attention. The most urgent, however, were the great elementals within Tina and Lydia—Frigid Crane and Blazing Qilin—and Stella’s elemental abnormality. Concerning Stella’s case, I had already asked the dragonfolk to consult their legendary flower-dragon oracle. Yet the kingdom was still in disorder, so I had better assume that their return to the west would take some time. And although I had left Stella with an experimental spell to suppress her symptoms, that would do nothing for the underlying cause. She needed a real cure soon.

I hunted through the forest of long, ceiling-high bookshelves one step at a time. *Chronicle of the Southern Isles; The City of Water Reborn; Dragons, Devils, and Vampires; A Compendium of Herbal Medicine; The Hero’s Twin Swords*—all ancient texts that I would have loved to peruse. As a fellow bibliophile, Tina would have understood how I felt.

Oh, if only the kingdom’s great library hadn’t been lost to a surprise attack by the Dark Lord’s forces! I lamented as I stepped into the next aisle.

“What have we here?”

A small boy stood before a shelf, straining desperately to reach a book. He looked to be about the girls’ age or maybe a little younger. His hair was pale blue, his skin merely pale, and his limbs slender. To all appearances, his mana was feeble...but I had encountered its like before.

While I waxed sentimental, the boy finally reached the cover of the book he sought. “Just a little more,” he grunted. “I almost— Ah!”

“Whoa there!” I caught the book from behind him just as he lost his grip and it nearly tumbled off the shelf. The deep crimson letters on its glossy black cover read, *The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord, Volume One*.

What a tome!

I flipped a few pages and found that its contents were in Old Imperial. Reading them would be a laborious process. Although the author’s name was scuffed and illegible, the binding suggested an extremely limited print run, possibly from a private press.

Let me see. The preface begins... “This is the true story of Crescent Moon, a champion born to the line of Earl Coalheart.”

Coalheart?! That’s the maiden name of Tina and Stella’s mother, Duchess Rosa! And only Crescent Moon’s first name—Alicia—has come down to posterity. Her origins are considered a mystery. If this book is

genuine, then it represents a historic discovery.

Despite my thrill of excitement and my urge to read the book immediately, I returned it to the boy. "Here you are," I said. "And be careful—it's quite heavy."

"Huh? Oh, r-right! Th-Thank you very much." Once he had gotten over his surprise, the boy bowed deeply, cradling the volume in his arms.

I waved my hand lightly and chuckled. "I see you're interested in challenging books."

"Y-Yes," he replied. "M-My older brother and Tuna—th-the, um, girl who looks after me—say so all the time. But I like reading."

"I'm delighted to hear it. My name is Allen, and I'm a tourist in this city. I'm looking for books on magic and medicine, but I don't know where to find them. Would you tell me if you can?"

"Th-That name..." The boy froze, his jewellike eyes wide with shock.

What's this?

I was still waiting for an answer, unsure what to make of his reaction...when I heard something scurrying on top of the shelves.

"Hm?"

"Wh-What was that noise?!" the boy cried. "A mouse?"

Mice and insects are the natural enemies of old books. And yet...

I waved my right hand, stealthily casting a detection spell that I had devised on my journey to the city. The "mouse" that it found swiftly vanished.

I see.

For all Lydia's strength, it was inconceivable that a lady of the Ducal House of Leinster would be allowed to go unguarded. Most likely, this also explained my vague sense that something about the seabirds near our hotel room hadn't been quite right.

"U-Um..." The boy faltered.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I said, fishing out my pocket watch to check the time. After closing the lid—inlaid with one of my dad's protective amulets—I continued, "I'm keeping someone waiting, so I simply must go, um..."

"N-Niccolò!" the boy supplied.

"Niccolò. When you can't reach a book, have someone get it for you. Asking for help is nothing to be ashamed of. And please let me know what you think of that book if the opportunity presents itself."

"A-All right."

I patted the bashful boy on the shoulder a few times, then left the third floor.

How I'd love to read that. I wonder if I can manage another visit while we're in the city. And what is the connection between Crescent Moon and

the House of Coalheart? Yet another investigation to pursue.

“My, that was fast,” Lydia said, joined by a welcoming note from Atra.

I found them sitting together on the first floor, reading a magnificent picture book with a gold-embossed cover. It appeared to depict a local legend. Two dragons—one blue and the other with wings made of trees—descended to earth, where they imparted something to the people.

“Yes, I’m back,” I announced. “As for whether I have anything to show for my search, well, yes and no.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lydia asked, giving me a quizzical look.

“Allen, dragons!” Atra exclaimed, pointing to the picture book. I rubbed her head, feeling at peace.

“Nice smell!” she chirped.

“Smell?” I sniffed my robe but failed to detect anything unusual.

“You’re certainly in a good mood,” remarked the scarlet-haired noblewoman.

“You think so?” I paused to consider. “Well, maybe I am.”

Lydia leaned over the table and rested her chin in her hands.

“You’re making a weird face,” she observed.

Should I call this yet another strange coincidence?

Pale-blue hair, familiar mana, status that merited a personal attendant, and...an elder brother. Doing something to repay a years-old debt didn’t feel half bad.

“Come on, Suzu is waiting,” I said, holding out my hands to the pair. “Our next stop: Cat Alley.”

✱

Much like the kingdom’s eastern capital, the city of water was caught in a spiderweb of canals. Cat Alley lay on its east side and reminded me forcefully of the beastfolk districts. Most of its many storefronts were wooden, and all of them were small—not a big business in sight. And the whole place bustled with activity. Commerce was even taking place aboard the gondolas and skiffs in its waterways.

I saw many beastfolk and local residents. Also black-haired and somewhat dark-skinned eastern islanders, people from the commonwealth, and traders from the free cities—the latter two rare sights in the royal capital. The wares included a wide variety of southern fruits, vegetables, and spices, as well as sea creatures that I’d never seen before, rough magical and mundane gemstones, handspun cloth, and dried herbs that I couldn’t identify. Tina would have spent

days exploring the market, while Felicia would have gotten right to work negotiating and securing outlets for her goods. I chuckled to myself at the thought.

“What are you laughing at?” Lydia demanded, turning from a storefront where she’d been inspecting a lovely piece of cloth.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied. “Are you going to buy that?”

“A likely story. And this is for her, not me.”

Atra held up a pale violet cloth for me to see. It met with her approval, if the sparkle in her eyes was anything to go by.



“Thanks for waiting!” Suzu cried, leading a grizzled otter-clan man out of the store. He looked quite a bit like Dag. “Grandpa, this is Allen, Lydia, and little Atra!”

The city of water boasted the second largest beastfolk community on the continent, after the eastern capital, and most of the otter clan were involved in waterborne transportation and trade. A family of immigrants from this city was the reason the otter clan of the eastern capital rowed gondolas. Legends that beastfolk had built the foundations of this metropolis might even have a grain of truth to them.

When the elderly proprietor saw the cloth resting on Atra’s head, he put his pipe in his mouth and cracked a broad grin. “The name’s Zig,” he said. “I keep the otter clan in this city running smoothly. You’ve got good eyes, sir. That’s handwoven cloth from the southern isles. And since Suzu brought you here, I’ll give you a bit of a discount.”

“That’s most kind of you,” I replied. “I’m of the wolf clan myself, although you wouldn’t know it to look at me.”

“You? You don’t look anything but human to— Wait a moment. The wolf clan? And Suzu said your name’s Allen?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

“Grandpa?” Suzu asked.

The old shopkeeper pressed a hand to his forehead, deep in thought. “Suzu,” he said at last, “remember our trip to the eastern capital four years ago? You know, when that rascal Dag couldn’t stop singing some lad’s praises?”

“Dag?” Suzu considered. “I remember hearing about a boy who went to some amazing school in the kingdom.”

Oh dear. I don’t like where this is going. Dag did tell me that the branches of his clan keep in touch, despite the distance that separates them. But it couldn’t be... Could it?

While I endeavored to escape reality, Lydia caught me off guard by seizing my left arm. Atra gazed up at me, happily wagging her tail.

“Yes, that’s right!” Zig exclaimed. “Do you remember the boy’s name?”

“His name?” Suzu repeated. “Hm... It *has* been four years. Let me think.”

“Allen!” a tiny voice chirped.

“That’s it!” Zig cried.

“Wait,” Suzu murmured a moment later. “Th-Then, could he be...?”

“Atra,” I groaned at the smiling child who had exposed me so easily.

"I'll ask, just to be safe," said the old otter, turning to me. "Are you *the* Allen?"

"Well—"

"He is," Lydia confirmed. I shot her a look, and she responded with a great big smirk. Inwardly, I groaned again.

The shopkeeper laughed so loudly that people started coming out of other beastfolk shops to see what all the fuss was about. "Well, well, well!" he boomed. "Wait right there! I'll bring out my best jewelry for your missus to look over! Dag and his people'll kill me if I don't do *something* for you!"

"Sh-She's not—"

"I'd appreciate that," Lydia interrupted me.

"Coming right up!" Zig vanished into his shop before I could stop him.

Wh-What energy. He's related to Dag, all right.

Suzu made another deep bow to me. "S-Sorry," she said, "but I don't think he can help himself. Did you come from the kingdom?"

"It's a bit complicated," I replied. "How are you related to Dag and Deg?"

"Only distantly. We still keep in touch, but we can't actually see each other often. We *were* planning to visit the eastern capital again this year, though. Before everything."

I glanced at Lydia. Then, feigning ignorance, I said, "Do you think the war with the Leinsters will drag on, then?"

"I don't get to hear many details, but, well..." I leaned toward Suzu, and she continued in hushed tones, "This is only a rumor, but they say the Leinsters aren't only strong on the battlefield. They have a devil in spectacles who's making war on our economy. A bunch of big northern merchants have already gone under, so the whole region is in chaos while— Is something the matter?"

"Er, no," I managed haltingly. "Nothing at all."

Oh, how blue the sky looks.

Duke Emeritus Leen Leinster was a master of domestic administration. Despite annexing two principalities in the Third Southern War, he had not only avoided economic chaos but actually increased the power of his house. He must have been delighted to discover what Felicia could do.

Lydia resumed inspecting fabric with an air of studied indifference. She must have known!

A seabird skimmed low over the canal, then climbed, wheeling in a wide arc as it departed. But no living bird flew at that speed. This was a magical creature under a skilled sorcerer's command. Which meant...

"Dag is practically a grandfather to me," I said, turning back to

Suzu as I reached a conclusion. “Meeting you here must have been more than coincidence. I hope that you’ll row us on sightseeing trips for the rest of our stay.”

Zig returned then, bearing a hoard of jewelry. And from among his treasures, Lydia chose...



“I’m terribly sorry, but we have no empty tables at the moment. Would you mind sharing one with another customer?”

The Cat Parting the Seas was an old café on the high ground near the assembly hall. And it was packed—mostly with local residents, to judge by their dress.

“What do you think, Lydia, Atra?” I asked the young woman who was still grinning smugly at the necklace I’d bought from Zig for her and the elated child in a beautifully embroidered purple hood.

“I don’t mind,” Lydia answered, giggling, while Atra piped her assent. Neither of them was quite all there.

“We’d be happy to share a table,” I told the waiter.

“Thank you, sir. Please follow me.”

He led us deeper into the café. Its decor was mostly wooden and entirely antique. Not an inexpensive item to be seen. I was looking forward to the coffee, about which I’d heard great things.

“Please take your seats here,” the waiter said, indicating a table by a window. Screened by columns, it stood apart from the other seats, but the view out the window was spectacular.

“Please excuse us,” I addressed an elderly man wearing a hat and spectacles who sat reading a newspaper. A timeworn cane rested against his chair.

“Oh, you won’t bother me,” he replied, folding his paper and favoring us with a magnanimous nod. The gray hair poking out from under his hat had a faint aqua tinge to it. I spied discretion in his stern gaze.

I pulled out a chair for Lydia, who carefully stowed her necklace before taking it, then seated myself beside her.

Atra remained standing, staring at the old man. Apparently, the candies he had left on the table held her interest. He broke into a grin and handed her a few. She bobbed a curtsy, energetically wagging her tail.

“You’re quite welcome, dear,” the man responded.

The delighted child clambered up onto my lap, her ears and tail still twitching. Beside us, and despite her efforts to keep a straight face, Lydia wore a dreamy expression. Perhaps I should have waited to give her all her birthday presents at once.

Once we had ordered coffee, the old man said, “I take it you’ve

come to see the sights. Well, you've picked quite a time for it. My name is Pirro, by the way. I was born in this city, and this year, I'll be...I don't even know how old." He laughed. "I stopped counting after fifty."

"I'm Allen," I replied. Indicating the willful noblewoman, who was still giggling in her own little world, and the child, whose full attention was devoted to candy, I added, "This is Lydia, and this girl is Atra."

"You already have a beautiful wife and a lovely daughter at your age? I'd like to know what you did in your previous life to earn *that*."

I laughed nervously, since a denial would only raise awkward questions, and gazed out the window. A small warship was making its way along the Grand Canal, carrying armed soldiers north. It flew the black rose and rapier of the southern Principality of Carnien.

"What do you think of our fair city?" Pirro continued. "I was born and raised here, but I'd like to hear an outsider's opinion."

"In brief," I replied, "I think that people can do great things when they set their minds to it."

"Hm... Not a bad answer." A smile creased the old man's face.

"The beastfolk seem to face considerably less discrimination here than in other lands," I continued frankly, stroking Atra's head. "In the past two days, not a single person has treated this girl poorly, and I believe that we have your preservation of history to thank for that. And since maintaining such traditions is easier said than done, I believe that your city is blessed with skilled rulers. I feel no reservations in praising their achievement."

"I see." Pirro beamed at Atra with unmingled affection.

"Your orders, sir and madam," said the waiter, arriving with our coffee. I couldn't wait to sample what Paolo's notes described as "the finest cup in the city."

Atra leaned toward her glass of fruit juice with ice bobbing in it, bringing her face right up to it and then pulling back. Beside us, Lydia let out an imperious "Mm."

"Oh, yes, yes," I replied, taking a few sips. The coffee's aroma was rich and deep—simply superb. I then added a dash of milk to the albatross's cup, and she began drinking as if nothing could be more natural.

"Pardon us," I said to the somewhat startled old man. "She isn't fond of drinking coffee or tea out of the house."

"I see," he replied slowly. "Tell me, can you guess where these beans were grown?"

It reminds me of a cup I once drank at the café with the sky-blue roof in the royal capital, so...

"The southern isles, perhaps?"

“Correct. Although we won’t be able to enjoy them much longer, if things keep on as they have been.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The old man’s voice turned somber as he answered, “You must have heard that our league is in conflict with the Wainwright Kingdom’s Duchy of Leinster. Although it hasn’t come to all-out war, the might of the Leinsters is too great for our divided principalities to match. Old folks like me know that all too well. I once saw the dread witch wielding the supreme spell Firebird with my own eyes. And the southern isles understand that as well as we do—they’ve been trading with the Leinsters for a long time.”

“I realize that I’m merely an outsider,” I replied, “and I’m certain that your leaders have already weighed their options, but why not make peace? If nothing else, this state of affairs is bad for business.”

The League of Principalities was a nation of commerce. And while it continued to fight the Leinsters, neither its roads nor its sea-lanes were safe. Without security, a mercantile nation could not prosper. It had nothing to gain from war.

The old man shook his head. “No one can agree on peace terms—or so I’m told. That’s what all the papers say.”

“Is that so?”

At worst, reparations from the belligerent principalities and ceding a few key ports ought to resolve the issue.

“Allen, you said your name was?” Pirro asked, straightening in his chair. “What would you do? Our opponent is formidable, and if negotiations fail, even the city of water may burn. How would you treat with such a power?”

In silence, I looked a question at Lydia: “*Should I answer?*”

The scarlet-haired noblewoman shrugged. “*Suit yourself.*”

I sipped my coffee and said, “Well, this is only my opinion, but I believe that the doge and his deputy should take immediate action.”

Pirro waited for me to continue. When I didn’t, he pressed, “Such as?”

“As to the particulars, I couldn’t say. But given the nature of the league, nailing down peace terms when public opinion is divided must be nearly impossible. So I think they ought to at least show the Leinsters without delay that they are willing to negotiate and wish for no more fighting.”

The league’s political leadership consisted of five marchesi in the north, six in the south, and the doge, deputy, and assembly of the city of water. Such a government did not lend itself to consensus. And although the Committee of Thirteen had been created as a supreme decision-making body, even its deliberations were too slow in wartime.

The old man looked strained.

“To my knowledge,” I continued, “only three armies on the continent can best the Leinsters in the field: the Howards, called ‘gods of war’; the Lebuferas, who prepare for battle with the demonfolk; and the forces under the Dark Lord’s personal command. If this war continues, they won’t finish with the northern principalities.” I stopped my spoon midstir. “As you fear, the southern isles may forsake the league as well, and the free cities or the commonwealth to your east may take the opportunity to seize territory. If that happens, this war will grow to engulf the whole south of the continent. What could possibly be worse for trade?”

“Isn’t that a bit extreme?” Pirro hedged.

“I can’t see the future. Who could have predicted civil war in the kingdom?”

The old man considered in silence. “I see. The rumors did justice to your—”

“Don Pirro!” a shrill cry interrupted. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you, sir! Please return at once!”

A young woman in blue formal wear appeared, her face taut with panic. Several more people followed behind her. Guards, I thought, and good ones.

“So, they’ve tracked me down,” the old man said, pulling his hat low over his eyes and gripping his cane. “Thank you for that fascinating conversation. If you develop any definite ideas of what a peace treaty might look like, visit this café again at any time. I would love to hear them. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The old man casually picked up the bill as he rose. Evidently, this would be his treat. I had given him the benefit of my advice, so perhaps that was fair.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman had already retrieved her silver necklace from her bag and returned to eyeing it besottedly. Its design evoked a shooting star and the Great Tree. According to Zig, it was a commemorative piece wrought during the War of the Dark Lord.

“Lydia,” I said.

“Hm?” she absentmindedly responded.

“Was that man just now...?”

“Pirro Pisani, doge of the city of water, I assume.”

“And this wasn’t a coincidence, was it?”

“Probably not.”

It’s hopeless. Her mind is elsewhere.

Resting my head in my hand, I cast a sound-dampening spell and said, “By the way, when will you introduce me to our hidden companions?”

Lydia froze. Atra imitated her. Then, depositing her necklace on

the table, the noblewoman turned to look at me. “When did you notice?”

“I think I first suspected this morning, during my magic practice. I wasn’t certain until the Grand Library.” The city of water was home to many seabirds. However... “There are no mice in that building, and certainly none that suddenly vanish. Once I knew what to look for, it wasn’t hard to trace it back. And concealing one’s presence *too* well is surprisingly conspicuous in a crowd. Besides, if you’d been carrying a video orb, you wouldn’t have waited so long to use it.”

Lydia heaved an exasperated sigh and called, “You heard him. The cat’s out of the bag.”

I heard chairs being pulled back, and two young women emerged from behind a column. Both wore wide-brimmed hats, and their dresses were identical apart from color. It was the same pair whom I kept seeing at the Water Dragon Inn.

“Introduce yourselves,” their scarlet-haired mistress ordered while fussing over Atra.

“Yes, my lady,” both women replied, although one with considerably more enthusiasm than the other. They removed their hats, revealing one to be a bird-clan beauty whose black hair—just long enough to hide her ears—resembled gray feathers in places. She kept her face neutral, but I could see the nervous tension in her eyes. The other woman’s milky-white locks reached her shoulders. Her expression said, “I guess the jig is up!” and she seemed to be enjoying the situation.

The bird-clan woman bowed low and said, “I have been granted the position of number six in the Leinster Maid Corps. My name is Saki. I have no house name. Please forgive me for standing guard over you without your knowledge.”

“Same here!” her companion chimed in. “I’m Cindy, also number six in the corps! And I grew up in an orphanage, so I don’t have a last name either!”

Personality-wise, Saki and Cindy seemed to be polar opposites.

“We made an exception and appointed a pair as number six,” Lydia added. “They’re permanently stationed in the city of water.”

“Then I suppose their mission is to gather intelligence and guard you,” I said.

“No, to guard *us*. And naturally, they aren’t the only ones.”

I looked at the two maids, and they nodded emphatically.

What was I to do? It seemed that the Ducal House of Leinster seriously expected me to facilitate negotiations. And so did the League of Principalities.

While I fretted, Atra climbed down from the chair and went to Saki’s side. “Birdie!” she cried, holding out her little hands.

The maid responded with a nonplussed “Huh?”

“She wants a hug, Saki!” her partner exclaimed. “May we, Mr. Allen? Please?”

“Go right ahead.”

At my urging, the bird-clan woman, who had already shown me a glimpse of her formidable magical prowess, timidly crouched down and wrapped her arms around Atra. The child piped a happy note in response.

The maid faltered, “U-Um, what—?”

“Lucky you, Saki!” Cindy cut in. “I’m so jealous!”

“I hope you’ll be good friends to her,” I said. “And please consult me if Lydia makes unreasonable demands.”

Saki responded with a nervous “Huh? Um...” while Cindy shouted, “Yay!”

Lydia drained her coffee cup and fixed me with a glare. “Excuse me? Do you think I’ll let you get away with disrespect like that?” she demanded. “You’re my servant, and I won’t hesitate to slice you up and incinerate what’s left.”

“Then we should sleep in separate rooms from now on,” I said.

A storm of fiery plumes whirled through the air. The maids recoiled in alarm, while Atra cried, “Feathers!”

I dispelled the display with a snap of my fingers. “Be careful! Do you *want* to burn down the whole café?”

“*You* made me do it,” Lydia countered.

The maids exchanged a look and began whispering among themselves.

“I guess the rumors were true.”)

“(Y-Yes. They undersold it, if anything.)”

Something told me they weren’t saying anything nice. I cast another sound-dampening spell.

After finishing my coffee, I turned to Lydia and said offhandedly, “I’d like to put in enough work to earn those candies. May I?”

“I don’t see why not,” she replied. “Suit yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m used to it. But I’m looking forward to my birthday.”

I allowed a moment to pass before replying, “I’ll do my best. Saki, Cindy.”

“Yes, sir!” the maids answered immediately and in unison.

“I’d like to know the state of the war in detail. May I ask you to procure information from within the league for me? Within reason, of course.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Please leave it to us!”

“Thank you very much,” I said.

Now, I think I'd better observe Allen & Co.'s head clerk in action.



"Is that information accurate?!" I demanded. "Doge Pisani and Deputy Nitti are in agreement, and the doge will travel to the southern capital himself if negotiations with the Leinsters move forward?!"

"Yes, Marchese Carnien! It comes from our agents tasked to watch the doge's and deputy's homes."

"Absurd," I muttered. "Thank you for your work. Please continue."

"By your leave, sir."

After dismissing my subordinate, I rose from my office chair and paced the room. The Carnien house on the city's central island was silent, swathed in the darkness of night.

To think the old men would make their move so soon.

In my mind's eye, I suddenly beheld the disgruntled face of Nitti's heir.

"Niche must have put them up to it, damn him!" I spat, then began reviewing my secret documents. Unlike the advocates of reconciliation centered on Marchesa Rondoiro—who had swiftly returned to her own lands, leaving her granddaughter in the city—the party of war had yet to fully mobilize its forces. If peace went forward under these conditions, then...

"You and Marchese Folonto would be deprived of your noble lives. As would your bedridden wife."

The space in front of me distorted, and a woman appeared, wearing a hooded robe of pristine white edged in crimson. A marchese's barriers, it seemed, were meaningless against an apostle of the Holy Spirit.

The woman was soon joined by a gray-robed man—Lagat—who had been my contact until just a few days previously.

"Edith," I said, "what brings you here at this hour?"

"Her Holiness does not wish for peace with the Leinsters," the woman replied.

"And what does she expect us to do?" I asked, glaring at the fearsome apostle. "If we rise now, we will merely be put down! Do you realize that the doves are all proven warriors with Rondoiro the Impaler to lead them? Are you telling us to die?!"

"Her Holiness is most compassionate," Edith replied, her lips curling in a sneer. "So long as you perform your duty—the capture of the sacrifice born into the House of Nitti—she will surely reward your devotion."

I knew that I had no choice. I had cast my die long ago. Yet

beginning before all was ready would increase the odds of failure. I could not afford to die. At least, not until I had achieved my goal.

“If you wish us to hasten our plans,” I said, “then I trust that we may expect some form of support?”

“Naturally. Fortune smiles upon you.”

“What do you—?”

“Is this the traitor to his country I’ve heard so much about?” asked a new voice.

I turned in surprise to find a stunning woman in a jet-black dress and hat sitting in one of my chairs. Her long fall of tarnished-silver hair was repulsively suggestive of blood. Her hands clasped a thick tome of great antiquity, its title illegible. Another woman stood respectfully behind her, clad in a hooded gray robe and carrying a dusky, single-edged sword of great length.

How did they enter this room?

The apostle and Lagat fell to one knee, bathed in the moonlight streaming through my windows, while I stood dumbfounded.

Are they really people?

The beauty’s cold silver gaze pierced me, and her crescent earring gave off a dull gleam. Long fangs peeked from her mouth as she murmured, “The Saint’s plans are absolute. I need simply cut down all who stand in their way. Now, shall we begin yet another of those tragedies so commonplace in every land and every age?”



Chapter 3

“Hasten the redeployment of troops returning from the royal capital to the southern front!”

“And we mustn’t forget to reinforce roads and bridges in the principalities. What is the weather like there this time of year?”

“If the encirclement of both principalities’ capitals drags on, the necessary matériel will amount to...”

“Listen up, newbie. Around here, Miss Fosse’s word is law. Remember that!”

It was yet another busy day at headquarters in the great council hall of the Leinster mansion in the southern capital. Logisticians and staff officers from all the southern houses shouted, wailed, or collapsed on their desks. All the while, Leinster maids briskly distributed documents. I’d seen all this more times than I could count in the month or so since I’d escaped the royal capital and come to work here. Dark had already fallen, but day and night didn’t apply in this place. We were all striving together to do the nearly impossible and maintain supply lines for armies that numbered in the tens of thousands.

I do wish they would stop calling me “Miss Fosse,” but I can’t start slacking now!

Just as I fired myself up to attack another mountain of paperwork, a tall, slender beauty with dark-brown hair and skin on the dark side appeared without a sound and snatched the pen from my hand.

“It is time for your dinner, Miss Fosse,” said Emma, the Leinster Maid Corps’s number four.

“Once you have eaten, kindly bathe and then rest peacefully in your chamber,” a shorter, bespectacled woman with blonde hair that stopped at her ears added, placing a military cap on my head. Sally Walker was number four in the Howard Maid Corps.

I owed both maids my life. They had carried me to safety here in the southern capital even though I was nothing but a burden in combat. That said, they could be a little overprotective. Couldn’t they see that I was raring to go?!

“Thank you, Emma, Sally,” I replied, conscious of the unfamiliar weight of my military uniform. “But I’ll eat here again tonight. I can’t take time off while everyone else is working their hardest. Even Sasha has gone to the front.”

Lady Sasha Sykes had been working alongside me until a few days earlier. You might call her my comrade in arms. But then she'd appealed directly to Duke Emeritus Leen, saying that she wanted to discuss something about cracking the league's magical codes with her father, the earl. She was currently on her way to the Principality of Atlas, close to the front lines.

Everyone else is earnestly tackling their own duties. I can't be the odd one out! And not out of a wicked desire to show Allen what a good worker I am if he visits the southern capital—which he probably will. I... I'm not fishing for compliments. I'm not, okay?

Emma and Sally exchanged looks and then began a whispered conversation.

("I'm glad to see her so enthusiastic, but don't you think this is getting rather out of hand?")

("I'm told that Mr. Allen and Lady Lydia Leinster fled the royal capital seven days ago. Shouldn't they be arriving at any moment?")

("Shall we rely on Mr. Allen to talk sense into Miss Fosse? She is adorable when she's flustered.")

("I entirely concur.")

I glared at the maids. "Emma? Sally? What are you scheming this time?"

"Scheming?" Emma echoed. "Perish the thought!"

"We're on your side, Miss Fosse," Sally was quick to add.

"I'm not so sure," I said slowly. But I never got a chance to question the pair further.

The door swung open, and several people burst into headquarters. A commotion filled the hall as a lone girl ran up to us, gasping for breath. Her brown pigtails bobbed, as did the symbol of her deity, the Great Moon, which she wore around her neck. It was Sida Stinton, a maid in training.

"A-Are you all right?" I asked, hurriedly pouring her a cup of ice water from a glass pot.

The winded girl gulped it down. "Th-Thank you, Miss Fosse," she panted. "I have a report. Just now—"

Before Sida could finish, several more girls entered the hall. I shot to my feet, so shocked that I knocked over my chair.

The group's leader kept her long platinum hair tied with an azure ribbon. She wore a military uniform, and a wand and rapier hung at her waist. With her came a wolf-clan girl wearing a Royal Academy uniform, a dagger, and a floral beret.

"Stella! Caren!" I cried, tripping over my own feet as I ran toward the pair. My long skirt wasn't making this any easier!

My best friends looked nonplussed for a second. Then they both exclaimed, "Felicia!"

Somehow, I reached them and threw myself into their arms. "I'm not dreaming, am I? You're both all right? You're not hurt, are you?" My voice shook, and tears spattered my spectacles. They had written to me that they were safe, but I had still never stopped worrying.

"It feels like forever since I've seen you," Stella said, wiping my eyes with her dainty fingers. "I'm so glad you're safe, Felicia." She seemed even more mature and beautiful than before, but I could see tears in her eyes too.

"I hear you've been busy. Thanks for the dagger," Caren said calmly, touching the sheath at her hip. She seemed to have changed a little as well.

"Yes," I replied. "If it came in handy, then all my searching was worth it."

The wolf-clan girl tapped her sheath and nodded emphatically.

Behind us were Stella's little sister Tina, wearing a hair clip and carrying a rod with an azure ribbon tied to it, and Ellie Walker, dressed in a Howard maid uniform.

Lynne Leinster, who wore a military uniform, cleared her throat and said, "Tina, Ellie, allow me to introduce you. This is Sida."

"S-Sida Stinton, at your service," added the maid in training. "Please forgive me for not being able to greet you earlier."

"So, you're Sida," Tina said. "Lynne is always saying great things about you!"

"Wh-What?" Sida faltered and looked to Lynne.

The red-haired young noblewoman crossed her arms and rounded on her platinum-haired peer. "Tina, don't spout baseless—"

"Oh? Are you *certain* that's the line you want to take? You'll make poor Sida sad."

"Wh-Why must you always do this, Miss First Place?!"

"I'm, um, Ellie Walker, Lady Tina's personal maid," the other girl chimed in. "I hope we'll be friends."

"M-Miss Walker," Sida murmured, awestruck. "Oh dear. O Great Moon, wh-whatever should I do?!"

The headquarters staff broke into grins, and the tense atmosphere relaxed. I shared a chuckle with Stella and Caren too.

Thank goodness. I'm so, so glad!

Behind us, the maids were facing an assault of their own.

"Emma! I just got back!" cried a newcomer with gorgeous, long scarlet hair, hugging her annoyed colleague. The corps's number three didn't wear a maid uniform, despite her profession.

"You're being a nuisance, Lily," Emma grumbled. "Where did that bracelet come from?"

The gleaming silver bracelet on Lily's left wrist hadn't been there when she'd left the southern capital.

“That’s the first thing you ask? I guess you weren’t worried about little old me.” Lily’s head drooped, her lilting voice dwindling.

“Th-That’s not— Well, I’m glad you’re all right. Welcome back,” Emma faltered, her usual composure cracking. “Sally, put that video orb away this instant.”

“What? I refuse,” Sally replied. “I see that embarrassment makes even you charming, Emma.”

“What?!”

“I love you, Emma!” Lily exclaimed, dropping her act with a musical giggle and catching the other maid in another bear hug.

With all the greetings out of the way, I started grilling my friends. “What are you all doing in the southern capital? Aren’t Allen and Lydia with you? I heard they went on the run after some trouble in the royal capital.”

At that, anxiety and panic clouded both their faces.

“Mr. Allen really hasn’t come here, then,” Stella said.

“Lydia,” Caren muttered. “Don’t tell me she actually took him and...”

“U-Um...?” Baffled, I turned to the younger girls.

“As you said, our tutor seems to have flown south from the royal capital with Lydia,” Tina supplied.

“S-So, we assumed they’d come to the southern capital,” Ellie continued.

“But if they’re not here,” Lynne concluded, “then they might in all seriousness be in the city of water.”

“N-No,” I groaned, sinking toward the floor—and into a chair that Emma and Sally placed under me with practiced ease. They then began cooling me with a folding fan made in the southern isles.

Ugh! Allen even wrote that he’d be visiting the southern capital.

“We should start by gathering intelligence. But be that as it may”—Lynne gave me a puzzled stare—“Felicia, what on earth is that uniform?”

“W-Well...” I faltered and shot Emma and Sally a pleading look. *Help!*

But to my frustration, the beautiful maids remained impassive.

“You look great!” Tina chimed in.

“The c-colors remind me of what Mr. Allen wears,” added Ellie.

“I... I wouldn’t say so,” I answered, fidgeting in embarrassment.

My outfit was specially made, although it had been based on the scarlet Leinster uniform that Lynne wore herself. I’d had mine dyed black and white and the skirt lengthened. My cap was also colored to match.



“Emma,” Lynne said at last, “what’s happened since we left for the royal capital?”

“Are you involved in this too, Sally?” asked Stella.

Meanwhile, Lily released Emma and set upon Sida. The maid in training shrieked while her superior laughed.

Emma and Sally stood to attention and answered cheerfully.

“The venerable master and mistress commanded that Miss Fosse should have ‘a uniform befitting her rank.’”

“And I daresay they were quite right to do so. Miss Fosse has been a great asset to headquarters throughout our war with the league.”

My friends and the younger girls looked at each other, then at me.

“Felicia,” Stella said hesitantly, “what have you been doing?”

“You only wrote that you were ‘helping out with logistics,’” Caren said. “I heard a little more from Lynne, but what do they mean, ‘befitting your rank’?”

“W-Well, you see...” A surge of embarrassment made me want to run for it.

Jeez! A-And this is all Allen’s fault! If he’d visited the southern capital first, I would have changed back into my maid uniform—I mean, my normal clothes right away.

While I was busy griping at the absent president of Allen & Co., a mild voice said, “Allow me to explain.”

All at once, you could cut the tension in headquarters with a knife. The new arrivals stood up straighter as a tall, thin old gentleman entered. His curly red hair was streaked with gray, and he wore formal wear instead of a uniform. Even I stood and bowed, supported by Emma and Sally.

“At ease, if you don’t mind,” the old gentleman said, raising his left hand slightly. “Let me start by introducing myself. I’m Leen Leinster, and for what it’s worth, I used to be a duke. I’m overseeing the headquarters of this campaign at my daughter’s and my son-in-law’s request. It’s a sinecure, really. All I do is sit behind a desk.”

Whatever Duke Leen said, all of us who had spent a month fighting here knew that we couldn’t have maintained the supply lines to the southern front without him.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Stella responded, speaking for her group. “I am Duke Howard’s eldest daughter, Stella. This is my sister, Tina; Ellie, the heir to the Walker name; and my good friend Caren.”

Her refined gestures nearly took my breath away. Stella had always been pretty, but now she seemed like a different person. What had happened to her during the war?

Tina and Ellie nervously stammered their own introductions.

The former duke looked positively grandfatherly as he nodded and replied, "It's an honor to meet the brightest lights of the next generation. I hope you'll continue to be good friends to Lynne."

"We will!" Tina and Ellie promised.

"D-Dear grandfather!" Lynne spluttered, blushing. "Th-That's none of your business."

The hall erupted in laughter.

After a last, loving look at his granddaughter, Duke Leen turned to the wolf-clan girl. "And you must be Caren."

"Y-Yes, sir." My friend took off her beret, looked the former duke in the eye, and said firmly, "I am Caren, daughter of Nathan and Ellyn of the wolf clan."

Instantly, Duke Leen was all smiles. "Oh, I thought as much! I've been hoping for a chance to speak with you in person. Your parents and brother have done so much for my daughter and grandchildren. And Lydia is full of praise for you. Please, make yourself at home! We're happy to have you!"

Caren's eyes widened in surprise. "*Lydia praised me?*" she murmured, tail wagging slowly.

"L-Lily?!" Lynne cried in alarm as the laughing maid finally released Sida and grabbed her cousin. The confused maid in training babbled, "O Great Moon, I... I've made a terrible mistake."

"Oh, honestly," the red-haired noblewoman continued. Then her annoyance gave way to a serious expression. "Dear grandfather, how has the war been going recently? We avoided the royal capital on our way here, so we haven't had fresh news in three days."

"The big picture hasn't changed," Duke Leen replied. "But let's sit while we talk. You must be tired. Emma."

"Yes, venerable master." Emma signaled to her fellow maids, who soon fetched two sofas and a chair. Stella and Caren sat on either side of me, while the younger girls took the other sofa.

Duke Leen sank into the chair and began explaining the military situation in a matter-of-fact tone. "Following our initial victory, our troops encircled the capital cities of Atlas and Bazel. We're now in the process of supplementing them with our main force as it returns from the royal capital. Our frontline commander is my wife, 'Scarlet Heaven' Lindsey, and Liam, the current duke, is our commander in chief. Our spymaster, Earl Sykes, and his daughter, Sasha, are near the front as well. Our griffin riders are continuing to strike northern roads, bridges, and ports from the air. The enemy still seems determined to resist till the bitter end, but their morale is flagging. We have nothing to fear in a pitched battle."

I don't know much about military affairs, but I do understand this. I reached into my pocket and took out a gold coin from the league. Its

front showed the Grand Canal, and its reverse, the flower and water dragons. *From the other side's point of view, this war must be a massive financial loss. Maybe that will convince them to throw in the towel.*

"At Felicia's suggestion, we're also influencing grain prices in both principalities on a massive scale," Duke Leen continued. "In Bazel, wheat is only slightly more expensive than it was before the war, but prices in Atlas keep creeping up to new record highs. Some of the major northern merchants were hoarding grain...but we spread that information throughout the northern principalities, straining relations between not only the two we're fighting but all five of them. Refugees are beginning to flee Atlas in droves."

Stella, Caren, Tina, and Ellie were speechless.

"So you actually went through with all that, then," Lynne sighed. I toyed with the gold coin in my hand.

I... I mean, how was I supposed to know they'd approve all of my suggestions?

At last, Tina raised her hand and said, "May I repeat an earlier question?"

I knew exactly which one she meant.

"What is Felicia's position? Lynne told me that she's been given all of Mr. Allen's wartime authority, but I'm not sure what that means."

"T-Tina, y-you must be tired after such a long trip. Wouldn't you like to rest before—"

Before I could finish, my best friends clamped their hands over my mouth.

"Felicia."

"Be quiet."

While I screamed mentally, Duke Leen smiled, nodded, and said, "Emma, Sally."

"Yes, venerable master."

"We shall see to it."

The maids bowed gracefully, then each placed a hand on my shoulder.

"By direct appointment of the venerable master," Emma proudly informed my friends, "Miss Fosse currently serves as the acting inspector general of logistics on the southern front."

"She wears a uniform by the personal command of Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster," Sally added. "In her own words, 'We need to show everyone how wonderful little Felicia is!'"

Stella and Caren were so shocked that they let go of my mouth, and the younger girls seemed just as stunned.

"Oh, I knew it!" Lily declared smugly. "The venerable mistress just loves that sort of thing."

"U-Um," I stammered. "You see..."

Emma and Sally watched me squirm as they gleefully continued.

“Miss Fosse couldn’t stand wearing her new uniform until a few days ago. She spent her time here in a *maid* uniform instead. But she took to it once she heard that Mr. Allen had fled the royal capital.”

“In her own words, she wears it ‘to help give Allen the earful he deserves!’”

“Emma?! Sally?!” I cried. “Y-You *both* told me that the maid uniform would have more impact if I showed him the military one first! So— Ah.” I clapped my hands over my mouth.

Five stares pierced me as my best friends seized my arms. I squealed. “St-Stella? C-Caren?”

“Felicia,” Stella said slowly.

“Won’t you give us more details?” Caren finished for her.

Tina and Lynne whispered seriously together, while Ellie fretted.

(“Could it be that Mr. Allen is soft on Ellie because...?”)

(“It’s certainly a possibility.”)

Lily, who had been the most relaxed of us so far, was trembling. “A maid uniform?” she murmured. “A *maid* uniform? A *maid* uniform?!”

A storm of fiery flowers smashed against Emma’s and Sally’s barriers and disintegrated.

“Y-You see,” I hedged, fumbling for an excuse, “it r-really had nothing to do with Allen. I just, um... Eep!”

“Felicia?!” Stella and Caren shouted in alarm as my head spun.

“You must all be tired from your long journey,” I heard Duke Leen say wryly. “Rest easy for today. That goes for our hardworking acting inspector general of logistics as well. I’ll make my own inquiries into Allen and Lydia’s whereabouts.”

✱

“I... I’m telling you, it’s not like that!” Felicia cried. “I n-never planned to get a real rank or even a uniform. But Duke Leen and Duchess Lindsey insisted, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Yes, yes,” I said. “We know.”

“Oooh... Stella, you meanie. I wish you wouldn’t take after *that* side of Allen.”

Felicia pouted like a child, sitting on a wooden chair in her purple nightgown while I brushed her long hair. After her fainting spell, we’d all eaten dinner and then retired to a large bath before returning, refreshed, to the spacious chamber we’d been assigned. It contained seven beds—one each for me, Caren, Felicia, Tina, Ellie, Lynne...and our bodyguard, Lily, who was currently out preparing tea with Ellie.

“Felicia,” I said, “your hair has a lot of damage. Have you been eating and sleeping right?”

Felicia pulled a face like a child who'd been caught being naughty and murmured, "Lately."

"Mr. Allen will be cross if you work yourself too hard," I warned her, chuckling. "There. That's better."

Reluctantly, she admitted, "He said as much in his letter. Thanks, Stella."

"You're welcome." I pulled Felicia's newly neatened hair into a simple ponytail and put away the brush.

Outside the windows, a slightly red-tinged moon rested amid innumerable stars.

Is Mr. Allen looking up at this same sky?

I sat down on a chair and turned my attention to my sister and her friend, who had been muttering to each other on a bed near the door ever since we'd returned to our room. "Are you in a better mood now, Tina, Lynne?"

The pair looked up, one wearing a nightgown of pale azure, and the other, of pale scarlet. I rarely saw them looking so glum. They were frowning intently at Felicia's chest, which her nightgown couldn't help but emphasize.

"We've just been struck by a new side of the world's cruelty, Stella," Tina replied. "I knew, of course. In my head, I knew! But... But... But while you and Ellie are guilty, Felicia is beyond the pale! Oh, if only, *if only* my comrade were here!"

"I'm certain there are no gods," Lynne added, gazing morosely at her own slender figure. "And if there are, they must all be rotten."

My first meeting with my sister's "comrade"—Alice, the Hero—seemed like a distant memory.

"Why am *I* part of this group?" Caren sighed. Tina and Lynne had roped her into their camp, where she now sat discontentedly with a towel on her head. She had on pale-yellow sleepwear in lieu of one of Mr. Allen's shirts.

"You're one of us!" Tina immediately insisted, backed up by a firm "That's right!" from Lynne.

My best friend crossed her arms and scowled. "How rude. I'm not hung up on—"

Just then, the door opened to admit two maids.

"We're baaack!"

"W-We've just returned, my ladies."

"Welcome back, Lily, Ellie," I said.

"Welcome back!" Felicia echoed.

Tina, Lynne, and Caren, however, maintained a stony silence. All three took one look at the pair's chests, then turned around and went back to hugging their knees.

Lily was wearing a floral-print yukata, which served as sleepwear

in the eastern capital. Ellie's nightgown matched Tina's and Lynne's, except that it was pale green. Their bosoms stood out through the thin fabric, and Lily wore her hair down, lending her a hint of allure.

I wish I had a yukata. Mr. Allen's mother promised to make me one, so ideally, I'd like it to match his. We would both wear them to the Summer Festival and—

I shook my head furiously to clear it.

"Stella?" Felicia asked. She looked confused, but I was too caught up in my own problems to reassure her.

No. Stop that, Stella. Don't you think you're getting a little too carried away? Remember, the suppression spell that Mr. Allen left is keeping you much healthier than before, but you can still barely use magic. This is exactly when you ought to maintain discipline and—

Lily and Ellie deposited their silver trays on the table.

"That was a lovely bath!" the older maid lilted, pouring tea with excellent form—and a frightening smile. "Now, Miss Fosse, may I ask you about this maid uniform I'm told you wore?"

"W-Well, y-you see..." Felicia faltered. Then she turned to us and wailed pitifully, "St-Stella, help! Y-You too, Caren!"

While I fumbled for a response, Caren sighed and rose out of her dejection. Then, in a flash of violet lightning, she stood barring the maid's path.

"That's enough, Lily," she said. "I won't take any more of your depredations lying down."

"Oh-ho? And what do you propose to do about it?" Lily answered cheerfully as she finished pouring the tea and set down the pot. Her bracelet peeked out of her left sleeve.

Humph!

I shot a meaningful glance at my best friend, who was glaring at Lily's chest with an animosity usually reserved for a mortal enemy.

With utmost gravity, Caren declared, "I'll forget all about asking Felicia to make you a maid uniform."

"Y-You wouldn't!" Lily cried, stunned. Then she flopped onto a bed and started flailing her limbs. "Th-That's not fair! It's too cruel!"

I'd call this a victory.

"I consider that a lenient punishment," Caren said, looking down at the maid with her arms folded. "But anyway, how did you even get your bust to grow so— No, never mind. Forget I said anything."

Lily stopped flailing. "I didn't really *do* anything," she answered, looking mystified. "I ate good food, got plenty of sleep, and kept active, and this is how I turned out!"

Caren reeled, wide-eyed—as did Tina and Lynne, who had been listening intently.

A nasty idea struck me.

“Why don’t you give *your* answer, Felicia?” I suggested.

“Wh-Why only me?!” she demanded. “What about you, Stella?!”

“I’m average. Now, don’t keep us waiting.”

Tina and Lynne silently urged her to speak as well, ignoring Caren, who was accepting a cup of tea from Ellie and trying to calm down.

At last, Felicia gave in. “Th-The only thing unusual I’ve done is spend a lot of time in bed,” she said, fiddling with her hair. “I’ve always been sickly, and athletics were never my strong suit. I don’t eat a lot either. A-And having big breasts is kind of a nuisance, anyway. I have a hard time finding cute bras, and—”

“Lies!” Tina roared.

“I’ve seen your bra, and it was stylish!” Lynne snapped. They sounded for all the world like interrogators.

I thought back to how my best friend had looked when we’d undressed for the bath. If I recalled correctly, her bra *had* been quite chic.

“Felicia,” Caren said, setting down her teacup, “you didn’t used to be so particular about underwear, did you?”

“Th-The maids at Allen & Co. shouted at me that what I had was ‘out of the question.’ Th-That’s the only reason! A-Anyway, it’s not all that it’s cracked up to be!” Felicia ducked behind me, quivering with embarrassment.

The girls fell silent, their expressions indescribable.



Now we can finally have some—

“It makes for well-received hugs, though,” Lily chimed in suddenly from the edge of the bed, where she sat snacking on pastry. We were all stunned.

Hugs? Who had she been— Those matching bracelets.

I could feel my cheeks puffing up with displeasure. It might have been childish, but I couldn’t help it. White lights flickered as a little of my mana leaked out.

“Lily,” Tina began, while Ellie babbled.

“D-Don’t tell me...” Lynne gasped.

“You cut ahead of us, didn’t you?” Caren demanded.

The maid touched her lips in a grown-up gesture and gave a smug little laugh. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” she replied. “But I’m not telling.”

I fumed. Behind my back, Felicia muttered, “H-He likes hugs? Th-Then, if I wear a maid uniform and beast ears and—” Her unsettling whisper ended in a squeak as she thudded onto the bed in a swoon.

A maid uniform with beast ears? That piqued my curiosity, but it could wait.

“Lily,” I said, “Mr. Allen, Lydia, and Atra are all missing, but you don’t seem the least bit concerned.”

The yukata-clad maid didn’t reply, but her gaze was calm.

“You’ve had a good idea where they are since we were in the eastern capital, haven’t you? And I’ll bet that bracelet has something to do with it,” Caren joined in. “Where have they gone?!”

“Well, I *am* her big sister,” Lily answered, giggling. “So I thought I’d play favorites.”

“That’s no excuse to—”

“I have it!” Tina exclaimed, interrupting Caren. She stood up on her bed, hands on her hips and conviction in her voice. “Our tutor really *is* in the city of water, isn’t he?”

We all gave a start. The city of water was the heart of the League of Principalities—which, needless to say, made it enemy territory. True, Lydia was fond of threatening to run off to the city, or to Lalannoy, but she had only been joking about—

“For most people, that would be out of the question,” Tina continued confidently. “But Mr. Allen and Lydia will be fine, even in the heart of enemy territory. I thought it was strange that we got permission to come south so easily when we had so little to go on.” She paused to consider. “Do you think that father and the other people in charge knew where they were going to go?”

Ellie groaned.

“It can’t be,” Lynne murmured. “Unless...”

“You’re right that just about nowhere is too dangerous for my brother and Lydia,” Caren admitted, although she didn’t look happy about it.

“And they went straight there?” Felicia grumbled, hugging a pillow. “Allen, you jerk.”

“But it’s a long way from the southern capital to the city of water,” I pointed out. “Not even a griffin can make it there and back again.”

Griffins would be our means of transportation if we decided to make for the city too. The league didn’t seem to employ aerial forces, so we could expect to reach its capital without too much trouble. But that would leave us stranded deep in enemy territory.

“Exactly!” Lily chimed in, laughing. “The two of them are staying in the city of water. But don’t even think about taking a one-way trip to join them. No one but Allen and Lydia would ever get permission for that.”

None of us had an answer to that. We knew how reckless it would be. Yet I couldn’t help wanting to stand beside him. To help him.

After a long, brooding silence, Tina said, “Oh, I know.”

She hopped down from her bed, fetched a map from her luggage, and unfurled it on the centermost bed. While we all gathered round and peered curiously down at it, she circled two locations and drew a line between them. One was the city of water. The other was the capital of Atlas.

Tina looked up and said, “Lynne, the capital of Bazel wouldn’t work. But couldn’t a griffin make a round trip from the capital of Atlas?”

The red-haired girl considered. “It should be possible, albeit just barely.”

“Tina,” I murmured, “you aren’t thinking of...?”

“Stella, no one will ever give us permission to go with the state of the war as it is. But...”

My sister’s eyes blazed with determination. “I want to go where my tutor is!” they seemed to say. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to get there!” She had come so far in just a few short months, from a magically impaired girl whose outward cheer couldn’t completely hide her gloom to...this.

I closed my eyes and whispered mentally, for the umpteenth-thousandth time, *Thank you, Mr. Allen. I’m truly, truly grateful.*

When my eyes opened, I exchanged a nod first with Caren, then with Ellie and Lynne. “Right now, the Leinsters and the southern houses have the capitals of both principalities surrounded,” I said. “And I don’t think Duke Leen would want to allow us on the front lines. So...”

I stood up and held my fist out in front of me. Everyone except Felicia and Lily followed suit, touching their hands to mine.

First, we act! Regrets can wait!

“Starting tomorrow, we’ll help Felicia work. And we’ll help our forces to take the capital of Atlas as soon as possible. Once that happens, we should be able to request permission to go to the city of water.”

“We need to keep an eye on Felicia so she doesn’t overwork herself, anyway,” Caren agreed.

“Count us in!” the girls declared in unison, while a flustered Felicia cried, “St-Stella?! C-Caren?!”

“All right!” Tina shouted. “Now that that’s settled, we’ll get to work tomorrow and go to see Mr. Allen as soon as—”

She was cut short by a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I answered.

“I beg your pardon. I bring good news,” Sally said, entering. Emma was nowhere in sight.

Good news? At this time of night?

A faint smile graced the bespectacled maid’s normally deadpan expression as she reported:

“The League of Principalities has requested peace talks. Their conditions are unclear, but Doge Pirro Pisani is supposedly willing to visit the southern capital himself.”

We all gaped, unable to conceal our astonishment. Everything we’d heard in the eastern and southern capitals made the league out to be dead set on continuing to fight back. So why had they suddenly

I looked at Caren and Felicia. It couldn’t be.

“It’s our tutor!” Tina shouted, her cheeks flushed.

“M-Mr. Allen,” Ellie gasped, equally excited.

“Dear brother and sister!” Lynne cheered.

While I watched them romping on their beds, I decided to check my facts. “Sally, I take it that we’ll have to wait for more details?”

“Yes, Lady Stella,” the maid replied, although I didn’t miss the significant look that she gave Caren, Lily, and me.

“Enough of that!” I chided the girls, taking care to act normal. “It’s after dark, and you’re making a racket. And I see we’ve let the tea get cold. Caren and I will go fetch a fresh pot.”

“You stay here, Felicia,” Caren added. “You look like you’d collapse on the way.”

“All right,” Tina and Lynne reluctantly replied.

“Caren?!” Felicia exclaimed.

“B-Big Sis Stella,” Ellie said, “I’ll go with—”

“Miss Walker,” Lily interrupted, “you’re overdue for a hug!”

Once we were sure that Lily had forestalled the wailing younger maid, Caren and I left the room. Sally led us down the long corridor to a dead end, where we found Emma waiting for us. No sooner had we reached her than rigorous sound-dampening spells encircled our group.

The maids looked grimly at Caren and me.

"We have *two* fresh developments to report," Emma said.

"And this is the bad news," Sally added somberly, handing us a sheet of paper, which we swiftly read. It was signed "Roland Walker" (he must have been reassigned from the northern capital), and it said:

Ernest Fosse, president of the Fosse Company, participated in key rebel logistical operations during the insurrection. He seems to have escaped the royal capital before it fell and fled to Lalannoy.

Caren and I were too stunned to speak.

Ernest Fosse was Felicia's father. I had heard that she had been unable to reach him since her escape from the royal capital, but I still found this hard to accept. I couldn't bring myself to believe it.

The maids' lovely faces were as grave as ours must have been.

"This is all that we know," Emma said. "I doubt these suspicions will be pursued until the disturbance in the royal capital subsides."

"Miss Fosse is already pushing herself too hard," added Sally. "If we were to add this emotional burden on top of everything..."

"I see what you mean," I said slowly.

"I don't think we should tell her until we know more," Caren agreed.

Felicia was physically frail. Her health had even forced her to take long absences from the Royal Academy. This mental strain might cause another collapse.

Once the sound-dampening spells lifted, we could hear the girls laughing merrily. Beyond the windows, the moon looked redder than before. Suddenly, I recalled a legend that my late mother had once told me: "You mustn't go out on the night of the crimson moon, or the big, bad witches and vampires will get you."

To stave off my vague unease, I touched the sea-green griffin feather that I kept hidden in my breast pocket and thought of my magician in the city of water.



It was past noon, and nerve-racking secret talks with Doge Pirro Pisani on the subject of peace with the Leinsters had left me exhausted. When I finally made time amid the endless series of meetings to return to the Nitti house on the central island, I found our elderly steward, Toni Solevino, waiting to greet me in the entrance hall.

“Welcome home, Don Niche,” he said.

“I won’t stay long. I only dropped in for a change of clothes,” I replied. “Speak with me while I walk.”

The old steward followed me as I strode the hallways. Once renowned for his skill in espionage, he had lost his right hand on an assignment in the former Principality of Etna and now wore a black prosthesis in its place.

Through the metal window bars—installed during an upheaval in the city a century prior—I could see a fleet of gondolas coming and going on the Grand Canal. Daily life in the city never changed, even in wartime. I was no patriot like Marchese Carnien, but I *had* been born a Nitti, a member of one of the league’s most distinguished houses, so I would strive to preserve this view.

On the way to my chamber, I let Toni in on a matter of the utmost secrecy: “The doge will act personally to secure peace.”

“Truly?” Toni gasped. “Congratulations, sir.”

“I did nothing but stand back and wait while my father extolled the virtues of a speedy peace. The doge was persuaded by his persistence and— No.”

Doge Pirro, whose house of Pisani was every bit as illustrious as the Nitti, was a wise man. In his more than seventy years, he had been a skilled merchant on the Holy South Sea and fought in both the Second and Third Southern Wars. But not even he had been able to resolve on peace talks with the Leinsters.

Our severe disadvantage on the northern front was undeniable. The terms of peace would inevitably prove humiliating. At worst, not even a fracture in the league was beyond the realm of possibility. The doge’s anguish and the pressure put upon him defied imagination.

And yet, in the past few days, he had suddenly started speaking of the need for peace. Was I wrong to credit his conversation with that infuriating man for the change? I recalled the news that I had reported to the doge in the early morning four days ago: “The Leinsters’ Lady of the Sword and her ‘Brain’ are in the city.”

I could feel the scowl creasing my face.

“Don Niche?” Toni asked anxiously. “Do you feel unwell?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I had given Paolo his instructions and arranged that meeting in the café. But the doge had made this momentous decision himself.

“Pay it no mind,” I replied, speaking as normal to reassure the old steward. “I’m only a little tired.”

“I am in awe of your exertions, sir, but you have driven yourself day and night since the outbreak of war. Perhaps—”

“I can manage. My work is almost done.” I paused, then added, “Thank you.”

“Don Niche.” A mournful look came over the loyal retainer, who had known me since birth.

Is my exhaustion as obvious as that? I must do better.

“What news from the northern front?” I asked. “Spending so much time cooped up underneath the assembly hall has left me out of touch with current affairs. I’d appreciate any news you have to share, old man.” I used the name that I had called Toni as a child.

“Unrest in the kingdom seems to have subsided,” he replied, respecting my wish to rather abruptly change the subject. “Duke Leinster’s main force has already returned from their royal capital and crossed the border into Atlas and Bazel, where I am informed they have joined the besiegers.”

“Rapid redeployment using the railways, I suppose. The league could never move troops so quickly. We can’t even pass a decent budget for a rail system.”

Our league was not without railroads, but we neither viewed nor maintained them as a unified transportation network. Marchese Carnien had once put such a proposal before the assembly, but he had failed to gain its approval. Perhaps this was a limitation of our union of fiercely independent principalities as a form of government.

“The remaining Atlasian and Bazelian forces continue to hold their respective capitals,” Toni continued as we neared my chamber in the innermost portion of the house, “although small units occasionally sortie to harass enemy supply lines.”

“I’ve heard as much. And that those are the only effective offensives they’ve mounted.”

The Leinsters were strong—far too strong for us. I could see no hope of victory in a pitched battle, so striking at their supply lines was a reasonable alternative. And our allies had employed it to good effect, or so I’d heard.

“Over the past few days, a number of such sorties have met with devastating ambushes. Information is leaking,” Toni continued, speaking from his experience as an intelligence.

“Has our magical encryption been cracked?” I asked incredulously. “We updated it mere days ago.”

The kingdom invested heavily in intelligence as well as armaments. When it came to encrypting—or decrypting—magical communications, their expertise far surpassed ours.

“These reports are unconfirmed,” Toni replied, dread and rage unmistakable in his strained voice, “but Earl Sykes may be near the front. And the few survivors of our ambushed raiding parties claim to have seen a maid who laughed as she wielded a massive scythe.”

I stopped and stared hard at the old steward. Then I practically spat, “The same Sykes who boasts that he could even fool the Dark

Lord, and Ceynoth the Headhunter, who took your right arm? I suppose we can stop wondering whether the Bloodred Witch really is in command at the front.”

No sorcerer in the league was currently a match for that legendary witch, Duchess Emerita Lindsey Leinster. Marchesa Regina Rondoiro, the Impaler, might just stand a chance, but she was too well acquainted with the terror that the witch inspired to take the field against her. In fact, the marchesa had opposed war to the last and then withdrawn to her own territory. And although she had left her granddaughter, Roa Rondoiro, to speak for her in the city, she showed no inclination to return.

I opened the door of my chamber and stepped inside. It was a dull room. Apart from the bookcases that covered the walls, the only furniture consisted of a work desk, a chair, and a simple bed. Succumbing to fatigue, I sank into the chair.

“In addition,” Toni said, “foreigners have been frequenting Marchese Carnien’s residence.”

“Churchmen, no doubt,” I said slowly, taking a pen from a drawer and beginning to jot down everything that Toni had told me. “But I doubt he’ll take action. That man loves his country. No one cares more deeply for the league’s future than he does. He wouldn’t drag religion into a political affair. But continue to monitor him.”

“Certainly, sir.”

I leaned back in my chair and gazed outside. The clouds were moving fast—an apt metaphor for the city’s political situation. If I allowed myself to relax, I might fall asleep. Yet I needed to return at once.

Toni must have realized that too, because he said gravely, “What will the terms of peace be? Will we give up Atlas and Bazel?”

“I don’t know,” I answered drowsily. “No, I truly don’t.” I rubbed my eyes and blinked rapidly. “Only one thing is certain: the doge will travel to the southern capital and try to negotiate with the Leinsters in person.”

“A momentous decision, sir.”

“Cheers to our sagacious doge and my sensible father. Of course, there will be hell to pay when the war is over.”

If the doge took matters into his own hands, then at the very least, the war would end. The kingdom might have crushed its rebels, but it still had the Yustinian Empire, the Knightdom of the Holy Spirit, and the Lalannoy Republic to contend with. It could hardly afford to concentrate its energies on us. The domestic issues that would follow peace were what concerned me. Still...

I shook my head. “Well, offering up my head should help to smooth things over, if it comes to that. Judging by their remarks to

the committee, the former marchesi of Etna and Zana oppose peace, as do Marchesi Atlas, Bazel, Carnien, and Folonto.”

“Do not tempt fate with such jests!” Toni exclaimed, frowning at me. “If you fall, sir, who will carry on the illustrious House of Nitti?”

“That’s all right. We have my brother.”

I closed my eyes and pictured my young half brother—we had different mothers—with his nose in a weighty old tome. He was slightly built, almost girlish, and detested combat. And although he possessed vast stores of latent mana, he could only draw on a tiny fraction of them. Yet he was wise beyond his years. He had pored over every old book in the house and had now apparently perused most of the Grand Library’s collection as well. Just like that man I’d met at the Royal Academy.

My brother was exactly the sort of person who ought to carry on our name in this age of magical decline.

“He may lack experience with society, people, and the world, but his character is unimpeachable,” I said, twirling the well-used pen that he had given me on my return from my studies abroad. “Our house will be in safer hands with him than with someone who fled the Royal Academy like I did.”

“Don Niche—”

“Is he well? I have no time to see him,” I asked, interrupting the steward. I needed no apologies—I simply lacked what it took to inherit the Nitti name.

“He’s gone to the Grand Library again today,” Toni replied, considerate of my feelings. “Searching for the second volume of an old book, I believe.”

I considered this briefly. “Tell him not to spend all his time on books. I plan to send him to the kingdom’s Royal Academy next spring.”

“The Royal Academy, sir?” Toni repeated, taken aback.

“It’s a good place to learn what a vast world we live in.” Almost as an afterthought, I added, “And it’s safer than here.”

The supreme water spell passed down by the descendants of the prince, who had once ruled the city of water, was in danger of extinction. Of all the young heirs to the bloodline, only my brother might prove capable of mastering it. And while the House of Nitti did its utmost to conceal that fact, other families must have realized it as well. Someday, they would come for him. I needed to give him the means to defend himself before that day came.

My eye fell on a gold coin from the kingdom, which I kept on my desk as a display piece. Four years previously, I had been full of bursting with self-assurance. And in that land sheltered by the Great Tree, I had learned the taste of failure.

Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and Cheryl Wainwright, the Lady of Light, possessed the kind of talent that I could only conceive of as an expression of divine favor. But worse than either of them had been that freak to end all freaks from the eastern capital.

“In any case,” I said, fighting back a wave of intense irritation, “we’ve almost reached our goal. If we can just get through the Committee of Thirteen session tomorrow, then we can extricate the league from its plight. The Leinsters won’t be too harsh with us as long as we remain insistent in our calls for peace. Continue gathering intelligence, and remain vigilant against the other houses.”

“You may depend on me, sir. I shall maintain contact with Paolo as well.”

Toni said no more but remained standing at attention.

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

Hesitantly, the steward replied, “There is the couple lodged on the top floor of the Water Dragon Inn, sir. Are you certain that you won’t meet with them?”

A dissenting growl escaped me as I recalled what I had said to that man at the Royal Academy graduation ceremony. Those words had been the greatest mistake of my life. At last, I stated, “I do not plan to.”

“But Don Niche—”

I held up a hand to silence the old steward and continued in my usual tone, “Bring me something that I can eat quickly and strong coffee to wash it down. I’ll return to the assembly hall as soon as I’ve eaten.”



*Atlasian grain prices spiral out of control. Many flee principality.
Marchesi Atlas and Bazel fall out over grain prices. Reconciliation unlikely.*

*No hope of speedy restoration for northern roads, bridges, ports.
Cost of basic necessities in city of water continues to climb since outbreak of war.*

Trade from southern isles declining by the day.

“Hmm,” I murmured. “This is more serious than I thought.”

Lightday—our fifth day in the city of water—found me in our room at the Water Dragon Inn, grimacing as I perused top secret documents that Saki had procured for me. A pleasant sea breeze wafted through a wide-open window. The city remained peaceful—at least on the surface.

I deposited the documents on a round table, scribbled something on a sheet of paper, and leaned back on the sofa.

“What is? Here,” Lydia said, offering me a cup of the tea she had just brewed in the kitchenette. And of course, she was wearing one of my shirts.

Atra was out with Saki, Cindy, and the other maids, pastry shopping at an open-air market near the hotel. She had been a bundle of energy ever since we’d arrived in the city.

“The scale of the Leinster economic offensive,” I replied, accepting the cup. “Thank you.”

Lydia sat down beside me and leaned her shoulder against mine. She picked up the papers, ran her eyes over them, and flung them back down on the table. “It seems fair to me.”

“You really think so?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes. I mean, these people stopped us from going to rescue *you*. They should be grateful that we haven’t wiped their countries off the map.”

“O-Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say to that, so I toyed with Lydia’s hair while I shared my other thoughts with her. “In any case, if the city’s leadership remains sensible, they must be wishing for a way out of this war.”

“I’ll bet. And as long as that holds true...”

“Peace will work itself out. Now that that’s settled, I say let the bigwigs take it from here!”

“Why not?” Lydia replied. “You know, I’d love to stretch my legs.”

“Really?” I groaned.

“I *said*, I want to stretch my legs!” the noblewoman whined.

“Oh, all right.” I set my cup on the table, placed a cushion on the armrest, and lay down.

In no time at all, Lydia was snuggled up against me, giggling. I could see her long legs sticking out of her shorts. How was I supposed to complain when she was so clearly having the time of her life?

I felt her body heat as I lined up spell formulae I was working on in the air above us. An experimental ice spell, a bit of botanical magic, a form of strength enhancement, and a new application of Lightning Apotheosis. Also a far-reaching compound ice-and-light spell, which I hoped Stella would be able to master once she got over her elemental abnormality.

“For the girls?” Lydia asked with her arms around me.

“Yes,” I replied. “They make such rapid progress that teaching them is a trial. Not that it isn’t satisfying as well.”

The scarlet-haired noblewoman straddled my stomach. Her hair clip caught the light as she looked into my eyes at close quarters and wheedled, “Where’s mine?”

I had seen so much of this look, but no matter how many years passed, I would never get used to it. No one could possibly find fault

with Lydia's looks, at any rate.

"I just gave you—"

"I've already learned that one," she interrupted. "I have it down pat."

I pulled a face. The short-range tactical teleportation spell Black Cat Promenade was my attempt to mimic some of Anko's magic, and mastering it should definitely have taken longer than Lydia could have spent practicing.

I let out a long sigh and groused, "This is the trouble with geniuses!"

"Of course it is," Lydia said, resting her smirking head in her hands. "You should know that better than anyone, Mr. Head of the Class."

I grimaced. "Don't tease me like that."

"It's my right as your mistress."

It's no use. I can't win.

With a wave of my hand, I dismissed the formulae for the girls and deployed the one that I'd been working on for Lydia's birthday. Her Highness swiftly ran her gaze over it. Then a smile bloomed on her face.

"When did you make this?" she asked.

"Do I have to—?"

"Yes." Her tone brooked no argument.

Reluctantly, I answered, "I've been refining the concept since last year."

"Really? For that long?" She beamed smugly, kicking her feet as a lock of her hair swayed from side to side.

Able to bear it no longer, I said, "I-If you don't want it—"

"I do!" she cut in immediately. "Thank you! I'll learn it right away."

"Feel free to take your time."

"What could be more important than mastering the techniques and spells you dream up for me? It's been my top priority for four years now."

"Your Highness's wish is my command."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a pair of scissors that I'd asked Paolo to bring us. Since I'd managed to secure Lydia's permission to neaten up her hair, I ought to see to it before Atra returned.

"When should we visit the Old Temple?" I asked.

"Hmm..." Lydia considered. "Ten days from now. So next Fireday."

"Your birthday?"

Lydia was older than me, albeit only by a few months.

She sat up, grinning from ear to ear. Sophisticated black underwear peeked out above her neckline. "That's right," she replied. "I won't hear any objections. Oh, and don't worry—I already checked that it will be open. They say that it doesn't even close for war. Isn't that amazing?"

"Wherever you want to go," I said slowly, "I'll be there."

Good. She hasn't caught on. I think.

Lydia reached out a dainty hand. "Now you're starting to think like a proper servant," she said with a captivating expression. "I'm impressed. And I'll reward you with head-pats from a lovely older lady. Aren't you glad?" Almost as an afterthought, she added, "I bought new underwear too. Do you like it?"

I groaned, and she giggled, hugging my head as she had her way with me. I hadn't scored a single victory against her since we'd come to this city.

Then something triggered one of the magical birds that I'd loosed near Atra and the maids. The little girl was staring at a boy with pale-blue hair and his girl attendant, who were employing perception-blocking wards as they observed the Water Dragon Inn from a nearby alleyway.

With a grunt of effort, I scooped up Lydia and rose from the sofa. She let out a squeal and curled up in my arms, blushing furiously.

"Shall we tend to your hair before Atra returns?" I suggested.

After an embarrassed pause, my lady answered, "Yes."

I laid a cloth on the floor, tied an apron on Lydia, and seated her in a wooden chair. "What did you cut this with? A dagger?" I asked while I set about wetting her hair with water magic.

Sullenly, Lydia replied, "I don't remember." She most certainly did, but she evidently didn't want to talk about it.

"I know it was my fault, so I can't really complain, but what a waste of such lovely hair."

"What? Do you mean I'm not lovely now?" Lydia let her legs dangle, fishing for a compliment. Perhaps she wanted attention because we'd had so little time to ourselves. Atra had hardly been out of our sight since we'd fled the royal capital.

"Objectively speaking, I think you're gorgeous," I said, sliding the scissors into her hair. "And you'd look even more charming with a hair clip."

"Did you *have* to add that qualifier?" she grumbled. "I'll grow it out again. Will you pick a hair clip for me?"

"Choose your own. So, you don't think that long hair is a nuisance anymore? That's what you said when we met."

"It's still a nuisance. If I were only thinking of myself, I'd keep it

short. But..." A look of joy spread across Lydia's face. The rays of the setting sun shone in through the windows, and her damp scarlet hair glistened as she said, "I'll always keep it long because that's the way you like it. That's what I want to do."

After a long silence, I murmured, "You don't say."

"I *do* say!"

I finished trimming her hair, blew away the cut ends with a wind spell, and surveyed my handiwork. I hadn't given anyone a haircut in quite a while, but this one had turned out well.

"Even if you do grow it out, you ought to get used to someone other than me trimming it for you," I said, sweeping up with a broom. "You used to get haircuts from Lisa and Anna, didn't you?"

"But I have you now," she replied. "And are you sure you want to suggest that? Truly?"

I cleared away the cloth and removed Lydia's apron. She fixed a clip in her hair, stood up, and turned around. Her necklace gleamed.

"Suppose I took your advice," she continued. "Some man you've never met might end up being my barber. Could you accept that?"

A strange man touching Lydia's hair? I couldn't escape the mental image as I turned around, packed up my tools, and placed the bundle on top of a small cabinet near the bed.

"Now, what do you suppose we'll have for dinner?" I said. "I hope tonight's is as delicious as— Ah!"

I heard the light tap of Lydia's feet leaving the floor. Then she tackled me onto the bed.

"Don't look so worried," she said. "As if I'd ever let any man but you touch my hair. Just thinking about it makes my skin crawl. So, aren't you lucky? You get to have me all to yourself!"

I didn't respond at first. And when I finally did, it was only to muse, "Where did I go wrong in raising you?"

The scarlet-haired noblewoman raised her head and met my gaze. Then she closed her eyes and murmured, "You didn't make a single mistake. Not one. A world where I never met you couldn't exist—I wouldn't let it. If we hadn't met that day, during the Royal Academy entrance exam, I still would have found you, even if you were at the ends of the earth. So it was inevitable that we'd end up like this. Do you understand? If you do...say something."

I bashfully scratched my cheek. "Your Highness," I said, "I really don't know what I'm ever going to do with you."

"Wrong answer!" she snapped, rubbing her head against my chest.

"You know," I said, running my fingers through the scarlet hair I'd just trimmed, "you may be right."

"At least *try* to sound certain about that, because I'll never, ever, *ever* let go of you again. Not even for that awful Hero. Next time we

meet, I'll slice her up, incinerate her, and leave her bawling her eyes out!"

"Alice? Now that's quite a boast."

"I can back it up. After all..." Lydia flashed an artless grin that hadn't changed at all in four years. "I'm unbeatable as long as I have you by my side. No one in the world can change that."

*

Once Lydia had bathed and changed into everyday clothes, I sat her down in a chair to blow her hair dry. But before I finished, there came a knock at the door. Had Atra and the maids returned? I hadn't expected them yet, although I'd been monitoring them through my birds until they neared the hotel.

"It's not locked," I called.

The door opened slowly, and Saki entered, alone. As soon as she saw us, she bent in a deep bow.

"You're not intruding," I reassured her. "Aren't Atra and the other maids with you? Lydia, I'm done with your hair now."

"Mmm," mumbled the thoroughly relaxed noblewoman.

I waited for Saki to respond. Her feathery hair reminded me of someone I'd met only once, on a rainy day in the royal capital, and to whom I was indebted.

Lydia stood and took up a position on my left.

"Miss Atra and Cindy are on the first floor with...a guest," the maid said dispassionately. Her deadpan expression betrayed a hint of uncertainty. "Would you care to join them?"

I nodded. "Lydia?"

"You already know who it is, don't you?" the noblewoman shot back immediately. "Suit yourself."

I shrugged. It wasn't as though many people in the city of water were likely to call on us.

"We'll see them," I said. "Please lead the way."

"Why, hello there, Niccolò," I called.

Waiting for us in the first-floor café were the boy with pale-blue hair whom I'd met in the Grand Library and a maid uniformed in aqua. No sooner had they caught sight of us than they returned the greeting.

"H-Hello, Allen. And I'm s-sorry. I was just dying to see you, so I asked my house's people to find where you were staying. Then that little girl spotted us, and, well... Th-This is Tuna. She looks after me."

"Tuna, at your service," added the maid. She was tall and platinum blonde, with green eyes. And although her ears weren't pointed, her mana made me suspect that she had some elven blood.

“I’m Allen. What—”

“Allen, Lydia! Sweet!” Atra interjected, proudly holding up her paper sack of purchases from her seat on Cindy’s lap. She was wearing her purple hood.

“Thank you,” I said. “Well done, Atra.”

“I’m impressed that you did your own shopping,” Lydia agreed.

“And thank you too, Cindy, Saki,” I added while the child hummed contentedly.

“Not at all,” Saki demurred.

“We had a ball!” Cindy exclaimed. “Although we *were* taken aback when Miss Atra suddenly ran off and returned with this young gentleman.”

Tuna’s perception-blocking spell had been nearly perfect, yet Atra had seen through it easily. By “smell,” I supposed.

Lydia and I sat down on either side of the child, and the Leinster maids retreated into the background.

“So, what brings you here today?” I asked the boy, noting the way that the windows of a building across the canal reflected the evening sunlight.

“O-Oh, right!” Niccolò lifted a hefty old tome off the chair beside him and placed it on the table.

The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord, Volume One.

“I finished it,” he said, “so I came to tell you what I thought!”

I was floored. Even experts struggled with Old Imperial, and Niccolò had read a whole book of it in just a few short days?!

“Already?” I asked haltingly.

“It was fascinating!” he gushed. “I’d love to read the second volume too, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. The catalog says that it should be in the library, and every book in the collection is imbued with a detection spell, so I don’t think anyone could have taken it. Still...” The boy’s expression clouded. It was indeed a mystery.

“Allen!” Atra yipped, holding out her paper bag. I opened it and withdrew flower-shaped cookies, which I apportioned onto several small plates before passing the remainder to Saki.

“Does Niccolò always read old books this quickly?” I asked the elven girl.

She nodded repeatedly, apparently surprised that I had spoken to her, and said, “Y-Yes. Don Niccolò can read for half a day or more without pausing when the mood takes him.”

“I see,” I said slowly, recalling a schoolmate with pale-blue hair whom I had often seen in the Royal Academy’s library.

Between that and his wealth of latent mana, I suppose blood will tell.

“Please order whatever you like,” I said, offering Niccolò a menu from the table. “I’d love to hear your thoughts in detail.”



“So you see, this book is nothing like the *History of the War of the Dark Lord* that we know!” Niccolò concluded fervently. “It’s based on the letters of Crescent Moon, someone we know very little about even though she was Shooting Star’s lieutenant!”

We had finished the cookies that Atra had bought as well as our second pot of tea. Outside the windows, rain was falling on the Grand Canal and wetting the street in front of the hotel. Lydia had returned to our room partway through the conversation, taking the maids with her. I hoped that I hadn’t kept her waiting too long.

Outside in the darkness, I could see a man watching us without bothering to open an umbrella. He didn’t carry himself like an ordinary citizen.

“That’s fascinating,” I said, stroking Atra, who lay fast asleep on my lap. “I’ve read *A History of the War of the Dark Lord* as well, but it certainly didn’t lay the reality of the conflict bare. The accounts of demonfolk who surrendered are a real find. Do you know who the author was?”

“Not their name,” Niccolò admitted. “But I’m certain they’re related to the kingdom’s Earl Coalheart. The second volume should solve that mystery, so I’ll do my best to find it!”

In her seat beside the excited boy, Tuna had been watching for an opportunity to speak up. “Sir,” she said at last, “we really ought to return home soon. We’ll miss our boat.”

“What? I-Is it already that late? Wh-What should we do?”

Lydia and the maids reentered the café, all wearing hats. Cindy carried an umbrella.

“Let’s adjourn for today,” I said casually. “Where do you live, Niccolò?”

“Huh? Oh, o-on the central island,” the boy replied.

“We’ll walk you to the ferry. Lydia, you don’t mind, do you?”

“Not a bit,” she said. “Saki, Cindy, see to Atra.”

“Certainly, my lady.”

“Sure thing!”

Once the sleeping child was safe in the maids’ care, Lydia helped me into my robes with practiced movements.

“What are you waiting for?” I urged Niccolò and Tuna, who were still wavering. Then, to Paolo, “I assume that you’ll lend us umbrellas?”

“Here, sir,” the manager replied.

“Please use these, young sir, miss,” a manservant added, handing umbrellas to our two guests.

“Th-Thank you,” the pair answered in unison, nodding awkwardly

as they accepted the help.

As they made for the exit, I whispered to Lydia, "We're being watched. I don't know by whom."

My partner gave a short nod and stepped away from me, signaling to the maids with her fingers as she walked outside.

Left behind, I drew a folded paper from my pocket and passed it to Paolo.

"What's this, sir?" he asked suspiciously.

"Please deliver it to an elderly fellow named Pirro," I replied. Our eyes met, and I chuckled. "It contains my personal thoughts on the terms this war ought to end on."

The manager's eyes widened. "S-Sir, do you mean to say that you are fully aware of...?"

"I met him at the café you recommended, and he kindly gave Atracandy. Surely you'll be able to find him more quickly than I will?"

Paolo stood up straight, then bowed low. "My apologies, sir."

"I don't know anything, including this hotel's role as an office of the city's secret service. We merely happened to choose it for our stay. So I hope that you'll do as I've asked. Saki, Cindy, I'll see you later."

"I wish you a pleasant outing, sir."

"See you! Take care!"

Paolo remained frozen in that same posture as we departed.

We held up our umbrellas as we walked along the street beside the Grand Canal. Mana lamps began flickering into life, their dim illumination lending an ethereal beauty to the cityscape.

Niccolò walked in the lead, but he stole several glances back, mumbling as though he was about to speak. When he saw Lydia and me sharing an umbrella, however, he blushed and faced forward again.

At last, he said, "Th-This is a shortcut," and turned into a narrow side street.

"Please watch your step," Tuna added, following him. "It could be better lit."

I shot Lydia a look.

If they're going to make a move, they won't wait much longer.

Silently, I cast a wide-area tactical support spell that I'd learned directly from Her Royal Highness.

We proceeded down the stone-paved alley and came to a deserted bridge. As we crossed it, the watchers finally struck. Cloaked men armed with rapiers and wands barred our way forward and back.

"Wh-Who are you gentlemen?" Niccolò demanded, visibly shaken.

"Sir, stand back!" Tuna cried, tossing away her umbrella and drawing a dagger from her bosom.

The foremost man looked at me. “We’ve got no business with you two,” he said. “Hand over the boy.”

Oh?

I exchanged a glance with Lydia.

So we aren’t their target.

“And if we refuse?” I asked.

“You won’t live to see tomorrow’s sunrise.” The leader raised one hand, and all the other men started deploying water spells in unison.

“A-Allen, L-Lydia, run!” Niccolò shouted despite his pale face and trembling limbs. “It’s me they want! You should at least be able to get away from—”

“We’ll be fine,” I interrupted, still holding up my umbrella. “Lydia.”

“Mmm.” At my signal, the scarlet-haired noblewoman waved her right hand.

A moment later, numerous spears of fire materialized above the attackers’ heads—much to their dismay. One wrong move would see them mercilessly skewered.

“I don’t want any help from one of that scheming princess’s spells,” Lydia grumbled.

Princess Cheryl Wainwright, with whom we had attended the Royal Academy, specialized in light magic. The intermediate spell that I’d previously cast—Imperial Light Divine Diagram—was one that I’d learned from her during our time at school. It significantly increased the accuracy of offensive spells within a wide radius. Cheryl likened its operation to visualizing a map and then sticking pins into it.

“If you’re going to assault persons of consequence, I suggest you work on your stealth,” I taunted the lead man. The whole group was clearly shaken.

As things stand, we should—

Several streaks shot through the air, radiating dull light. Lydia’s spears launched to intercept, incinerating the ashen chains.

“Wh-Who did that?! I didn’t give the order to attack!” the leader shouted frantically while his men looked around.

The mana was coming not from within the group but from the surrounding buildings.

“Church inquisitors,” I murmured.

“It looks like we have some troublesome interlopers,” Lydia agreed. “Saki, capture these men.”

“At once, Lady Lydia.”

Before our original assailants could react, a flock of dark birds swooped on them from the canal. When the avian onslaught subsided, Saki was standing behind us with a large white umbrella.

No wonder she’s number six in the Leinster Maid Corps. I’d better not

get on her bad side.

I inclined my head to the maid, then returned my attention to the dumbfounded boy ahead of me. “Now, Niccolò, could you tell me the name of your house?”

After a moment, the boy said, “Yes.”

“Sir,” Tuna murmured nervously.

Niccolò nodded to her. Then, still looking a little pale, he said, “I belong to the House of Nitti. Niccolò Nitti is my full name, and I am the second son of Nieto Nitti, who currently serves as deputy to the doge of the city of water.”

Chapter 4

“Do you feel calmer now?” I asked.

Niccolò nodded firmly from his chair, cradling a cup of tea in both hands. “Yes, Allen.”

Tuna watched over her young master with evident concern.

After repulsing the attackers, we had fallen back to the Water Dragon Inn. There, we had explained the situation to Paolo and then returned to our room. Atra was in a different room, under Saki’s care. As for Cindy, she was interrogating our prisoners. Other Leinster maids stood guard throughout the fourth floor.

Outside, rain lashed the city of water, reducing visibility.

“Once again,” Niccolò said, bowing, “thank you very much for saving us.”

“Don’t mention—”

“No, tell us more,” Lydia interjected from near the windows, where she leaned against a wall with her arms folded. “Niccolò Nitti, you said your name was? Why were you attacked?”

Slowly, the boy began, “Well—”

“The Nittis are one of the oldest and best-known houses in the league, and their current head is the city’s deputy. His son was just almost kidnapped within the city limits—by a group that included church agents. We came here to sightsee, remember? Not for a tempest in a—”

I pressed a hand over the miffed noblewoman’s mouth. Her answering glare screamed, “Let go!” I ignored it and said, “You shouldn’t bully chil— Oh, shall we introduce ourselves? Although”—I winked at the pale-blue-haired boy—“I’m sure that Niccolò has already realized.”

The boy gave a start.

“Don Niccolò,” his part-elven maid murmured, nervously pressing closer to him.

“Don’t... Don’t worry, Tuna. I’ll be fine,” he said, leaning on her to rise, and looked at us. “Lady Lydia Leinster, the Lady of the Sword, and her ‘Brain,’ Mr. Allen. It is a great honor to meet legends in the making with so many feats of arms to their names. You will no doubt shape the future of the Wainwright Kingdom—no, the entire continent.”

My eyes widened in surprise. I had felt certain that he would only

recognize Lydia. When a rap on my hand prompted me to remove it from her mouth, she stood shoulder to shoulder with me, looking immensely pleased with herself. Why, I couldn't fathom.

"I'm shocked that you've heard of me," I said.

Niccolò hesitated. "My brother took a keen interest in you both, and he often wrote to me from the royal capital."

"Well now," I replied. That was a surprise.

"Oh really?" Lydia murmured, elbowing me.

I cleared my throat and said, "Cindy used her magic to 'ask' one of the attackers a few questions earlier, and he revealed that he serves the southern principality of Carnien. Given that their weapons also bore the black rose and rapier, I think we can safely believe him. Does that suggest anything to you?"

The crests of the families who ruled the league's constituent principalities were known throughout the continent, as were those of the houses who claimed descent from the prince. The southern *marchesi* used a black rose, and the northern *marchesi*, a white one. The prince's heirs boasted a blue rose—a flower that had once grown only in the city of water. Each house added its own weapon of choice to the design, making them easy to distinguish.

"Carnien?" Niccolò repeated, genuinely baffled. "No, I can't think why they would do this." He looked at Tuna, but his lovely maid appeared as confused as he did, so he ventured, "I know that houses have been maneuvering secretly here since the outbreak of war with the Leinsters...but abducting me would be pointless. I have no value."

"What do you mean by that?" I pressed.

"Don Niccolò!" Tuna cried.

But the boy motioned his concerned maid to be silent. "It's all right, Tuna. Thank you." Matter-of-factly, he said, "I'm illegitimate. My family treats me as a burden, so I doubt I'd be much use as a hostage." He had the resigned gaze of an old man, so unlike the look he had worn when discussing antique books.

"Forgive me," I said, with a sincere bow. "I didn't mean to touch on such a sensitive subject."

"It's fine. Everyone of any standing already knows."

There followed a moment of silence, which Lydia broke. "I can't make sense of it. If that's the case, then what did they want with you? Your houses disagree about how to deal with mine, but kidnapping a member of a house with equal standing—even an illegitimate child—is still madness. Is Marchese Carnien a fool?"

"Marchese Carlyle Carnien graduated from the city's Academy of Magic before marrying his predecessor's daughter," Tuna replied. "Since succeeding to the title, he has reportedly shown himself to be an able administrator."

The city of water's Academy of Magic was among the oldest and most prestigious schools on the continent. Marchese Carnien must have had some reason for launching an attack.

"You mentioned that Atra found you earlier, didn't you?" I asked.

"Y-Yes," Niccolò replied.

"Notwithstanding the fact that we kept our distance, and that I was casting a spell," added Tuna.

"Lydia?"

Her Highness took my meaning and waved her right hand. The mark of the great elemental Blazing Qilin was nowhere to be seen. "She's asleep," Lydia explained. "Asking Atra would be faster. Oh, and they're here."

"So I gathered."

A confused "Huh?" escaped Niccolò's lips.

"Sir, please stand back!" Tuna cried, darting in front of her young master.

I could hear heavy footfalls from the hallway. They stopped before our door. As it slowly opened, I said, "If you enter bearing weapons, we will regard the League of Principalities as our enemy. But you'll do no such thing, will you?"

After a moment, a deep voice replied, "A foolish question. We wish for perpetual peace. War is not profitable."

The door swung fully open, and a grim-faced man barged in. I placed him in his early twenties, older than Lydia or me. His pale-blue hair was on the long side and streaked with gray. The eyes behind his spectacles were narrowed in a piercing glare. Although he wore a cloak, his wet hair was plastered to his head in disarray.

Niccolò gasped and murmured, "Why?"

Apparently, he hadn't expected this new arrival—meaning that the man was as awkward as ever.

"You must be Niccolò's brother," I said affectedly. "Would you be so good as to tell me your name?"

The man's scowl deepened. He knew that I had chosen to ask when I didn't need to.

In glacial tones, he responded, "Niche Nitti. Lady of the Sword, Brain, you owe me an explanation." His words were charged with animosity and loathing.

It's like being back at the Royal Academy!

While I mentally enjoyed an ironic chuckle, a shaking Niccolò cried, "N-Niche! The two of them saved me from—"

"Be quiet, you little fool!" Niche snapped. "I didn't ask for your opinion. Return home at once and stay there. Tuna, you were meant to keep an eye on him. Have you forgotten what you owe my house and the Solevinos for taking you in?!"

The maid murmured, “M-My sincere apologies.”

“T-Tuna did nothing wrong!” Niccolò shouted. “All the punishment should fall on my head!”

“Listen well,” Niche growled. “You don’t want to test my patience.” Both his anger and his mana surged as he deployed a spell, dominating the room.

With a squeak, the boy collapsed into his chair, quivering.

We were short on time, so I snapped my fingers and dismantled the formula. Niccolò and Tuna goggled, while Niche clicked his tongue.

“Tuna, Niccolò seems exhausted,” I said. “Please take him to rest in the next room. I’ve already informed Paolo.”

“Huh? C-Certainly, sir,” the maid responded.

“What gives you the right to—?”

Before Niche could finish his outburst, Lydia was behind him. “You threatened us with your mana,” she said in a tone that brooked no argument. “I’m perfectly willing to take that as a provocation.”

Niche ground his teeth and fell silent.

I shot Tuna a look, and with another “C-Certainly, sir!” the maid exited the room with her trembling master. Once the door shut behind them, I cast another sound-dampening spell.

“Returning them to the Nitti mansion now is too dangerous,” I warned Niche. “Having them spend the night here strikes me as the simplest solution. That invitation extends to you too, of course.”

Niche didn’t respond immediately. He appeared to be deep in thought, considering the situation in the light of whatever information he possessed. At length, his brow furrowed, and although it seemed to cost him an effort, he said, “This is the city of water. Shedding blood within its limits is taboo.”

“Let none make war in the city of water.” Such, I had read, ran a prohibition laid down nearly a thousand years ago, and which had since gained the force of tradition.

With a wave of my left hand, I pooled information from the magical creatures I’d set to watch the hotel’s perimeter. They showed an armed group on the move, heedless of the dark and the rain.

“But it seems to me that we already have a situation on our hands,” I said. “You must have been followed.”

“We’re surrounded,” Lydia chimed in. “There must be a hundred of them out there.”

Niche was struck speechless. Then he gnashed his teeth at his own blunder.

He may talk tough and act fierce, but he loves his little brother.

“Close, but no cigar,” I joshed Lydia, my spirits lifting. “There are 107 of them. And since they use the same formulae as the last bunch, I

take it that they also serve the House of Carnien. No sign of church inquisitors for the present.”

“I was *almost* right. That’s a victory in my book!”

“Since when is this a competition?”

We left the future Marchese Nitti to stand dumbfounded while we bantered.

At last, he muttered, “Are... Are you out of your—? And did you say church inquisitors?” At that point, words failed him, and he merely glared at us with a strained expression.

“Our enemy has come for Niccolò Nitti,” I said, “and they’re about to charge in here to take him. This hotel is meant to be a neutral zone, I believe. But they’re still resorting to force. They’re panicking because peace with the Leinsters has begun to seem attainable. And yet...I don’t understand why they’ve become this desperate.”

Slowly, Niche asked, “What do you intend to do?”

I shrugged. “I’ll defend myself. Besides, I have a few questions for the Church of the Holy Spirit.”

*

“Hey,” Lydia called.

I was conjuring more magical birds while she lounged in a pile of cushions on the sofa. Niche had gone out, saying that he would speak to Paolo, so we were alone in the room.

Outside, the rain was growing slowly but steadily heavier. It was a perfect night to launch a surprise attack.

“The kid and his elf maid are one thing,” Lydia continued, “but can we trust that guy?”

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Don’t answer a question with a question. I forbid it,” she muttered, sulky and annoyed, and patted the spot next to her.

No sooner had I drawn the curtains and taken the seat indicated than the scarlet-haired noblewoman wrapped her arms around my stomach.

“Hey!”

“I need to replenish my motivation!” Lydia retorted without missing a beat. “Now, pet me! Pet me!” When I failed to comply, she added, “*Do it.*”

She’s impossible.

I tenderly ran my hand through Lydia’s hair, and her face settled into a satisfied smile.

“You don’t seem very tense,” I pointed out.

“I’m just loosening up. Now, answer my question.” Lydia rolled over to look at me.

“The league is at war, and it isn’t faring well,” I said honestly.

“Deputy Nitti’s son and heir must be a busy man. But when he heard that his brother was in danger, he came running. He dropped all his work, and he didn’t even stop for an umbrella while the rain mussed his hair and soaked his fine clothes. And did you see that spell earlier? As angry as he was, he still took great care that it wouldn’t affect Niccolò and Tuna.”

Despite hanging his hat in the grimy world of politics, deep down, he didn’t seem to have changed a bit since his school days.

“Niche Nitti is trustworthy,” I declared. “He knows what matters most.”

Lydia pouted, harrumphed, and then reached out and pinched my cheek. “High praise for a former schoolmate in name only,” she said. “Especially when you never have a kind word for *me*!”

We’d had nothing to do with Niche at the academy. Lydia had probably never so much as spoken to him, and even I had only done so in that brief moment after our graduation ceremony. But I remembered him and his words.

“Never forget a good turn done for you.”

Don’t worry, dad. I won’t.

“I think that I pay you plenty of compliments,” I said, slowly stroking scarlet locks.

“Not nearly enough!” Lydia retorted. “Now, stand up.”

I did as she asked, and she pressed her head against my chest.

Soon, she said, “If you trust him, then so will I. But if he attacks us, I’ll show him no mercy. Remember, Allen, I’m your sword—and no one else’s.”

“And for the umpteenth-thousandth time, I prefer you as the noblewoman who beams at my compliments.”

“Leave my status out of this.”

Our eyes met, and we shared a laugh, free from any trace of fear.

I handed Lydia her pocket watch, which lay on the round table.

My father’s warm mana reminded me of the protective amulet set into the underside of its lid.

“The city’s internal affairs are in chaos,” I said. “However...”

“The church is after the Nitti kid,” Lydia supplied.

I nodded and picked up my own watch. Considering everything that had happened, Niccolò must have possessed a strong affinity for beings like Atra. Which suggested that...

“They want him as a conduit for some form of ritual,” I concluded. “I don’t know where Carnien draws the line, but church inquisitors would have no scruples about stooping to such vile magic. You should carry Cresset Fox.” I drew the enchanted sword out of empty air and passed it to Lydia. Then I gripped the enchanted rod Silver Bloom, and the ring on my right hand blazed with light.

The noblewoman's expression turned serious as she accepted the blade and pulled away from me. "I've fought them before, at Avasiiek. But they won't be a problem. After all..." She did a twirl and broke into a grin. "You're at my side, and I'm at yours. Do *you* think they can beat us?"

I scratched my cheek. I was no match for this side of her.

"Funny you should ask," I said. "Fighting used to scare me a little, but not anymore. Isn't that strange, coming from a powerless pacifist like me?"

"Unbelievable." Lydia pulled closer and thrust her index finger at me. "That was your cue to say something impressive. Now, try again!"

I sighed and went down on one knee before her. Then, like a knight to his lady, I declared, "Lydia, I can only keep up my courage because I have you at my side. Thank you for staying with me. I'm sincerely grateful. We still have a lot of growing to do, but..." I looked up into the young woman's joyful face and swore, "Together, we're unbeatable. I firmly believe that. Even more than you do."

Lydia tugged on my hand. I rose, and she threw herself into my arms. Even her ears and neck blushed as she whispered, "I'll give that a passing grade."

"Much appreciated." I circled my arms around her and strengthened our mana link.

Lydia swayed and looked up at me. "What about a kiss?"

"No."

"Miser! I swear I'm going to jump you before we leave this city!"

"You are too free with your jests, Lady Lydia Leinster."

"Humph!" In a calmer tone, Lydia added, "I'll go change into something easier to move in. Would you call Cindy for me?"

Forcing a grin, I released her and walked toward the door. Then I turned and called, "Lydia."

"Hm?"

Casually, I said, "Let's sort this out quickly and visit the Old Temple on your birthday."

My lady gave a bashful nod, and murmured, "Okay."

Out in the corridor, I knocked on the door of the neighboring room.

"Who is it?" a cheerful voice called.

"Allen," I replied.

Through the atrium, I could hear Niche down below, apparently trying to summon reinforcements.

Cindy answered the door with a cloth in her hand. Apparently, she had finished her "chat."

"Mr. Allen!" she exclaimed. "Is anything the matter?"

“Lydia would like you to help her dress,” I replied.

“Certainly! Come in.”

I entered the room and found Saki on the sofa, resting Atra’s head in her lap.

Cindy pressed her hands together and giggled. “Being stationed in the city of water is usually a dreary job, but it certainly has its perks! Little Atra is adorable, I get to help Lady Lydia dress, and you, Mr. Allen, are even better than the rumors in the corps make out. Thank you so much!” The maid wore a dagger in a jet-black sheath on each hip. Given their shape, I placed them as weapons of assassination.

“No, we owe you our gratitude for all your help with—”

“Cindy,” Saki interrupted. I caught a hint of reproach in her gaze. Loud voices would wake Atra.

Her colleague mouthed, “Sorry!” then bobbed her head to me and left the room, closing the door silently behind her.

I approached the sofa and looked down at the sleeping child.

Softly, the lovely maid said, “May I ask you a question?”

“I’ll answer you if I can,” I replied.

Many-layered wards encircled the room, reinforcing it against surprise attacks, meaning that Saki was also an accomplished sorceress. Her pretty gaze wavered. Then, stroking the child’s hair, she said, “Why did you place Miss Atra in my care when we’ve only just met? Weren’t you concerned that I might harm her?”

“You? Never.”

“May I ask why?”

Lydia’s mana leapt. Cindy must have been teasing her.

“Atra is sensitive to the good and evil in people,” I said. “She would never take to you like she has if you harbored even a smidgen of malice against her.”

Rain lashed the windows, and distant thunder boomed. Atra fidgeted in her sleep.

“And I trust the Ducal House of Leinster’s maids,” I added. “You all share a sturdy pillar of good sense. I doubt that you’ve ever so much as considered harming a little girl.”

After a moment, the maid replied haltingly, “Thank you, sir.” The feathery parts of her hair were quivering in what I took to be embarrassment.

“And one other thing,” I said, recalling someone to whom I owed much, although I didn’t even know her name.

Saki raised her head and looked at me. Their clear eyes really were alike.

“During my time at the Royal Academy, I was saved by a bird-clan woman with eyes just like yours.” I paused before adding, “Please, don’t tell Lydia. She’s a terror when she sulks.”

A moment passed in silence. Then, “Yes, sir.”

Lydia’s mana had regained its equilibrium. She must have finished changing.

I stroked Atra’s soft white hair and was about to leave the room when the bird-clan maid straightened in her seat and said, “Mr. Allen, you are just as the rumors say. In fact, they hardly do you justice. Neither Cindy nor I nor any of the other maids stationed in the city of water belong to a house. Some of us are orphans, others immigrants, and still others beastfolk. And... And so...” A single tear rolled down her cheek. “When we heard that Lady Lydia’s heart had been saved by a houseless boy adopted into the wolf clan, we cried for joy. I can still clearly remember the thrill I felt then.”

Saki stared at me, not even pausing to dry her eyes. “You gave hope to us here, so far from the kingdom—a shining beacon of hope that perhaps even the houseless could go on to greater things. That... That is by no means something that just anyone could do. Please, try to bear that in mind. For your sake or that of Lady Lydia and Miss Atra, we members of the Leinster Maid Corps stationed in the city of water would gladly lay down our lives.”

I didn’t know what to say. Much to my discredit, tears blurred my vision. To think that people in this distant land held me in such high esteem.

At last, I wiped my eyes and managed, “Thank you very much. But please, don’t throw your lives away.”

Saki responded with a beautiful smile. “Yes, sir.”

“Tell me,” Lydia growled, materializing behind me without warning, “what do we have here?”

Had she teleported using Black Cat Promenade?!

I found myself seized by the noblewoman, who now wore a scarlet-and-white ensemble tailored for sword fighting, with the enchanted blade hanging from her belt. She must have prepared this outfit for the trip, since her ordinary combat attire bore the Leinster crest.

“Saki! You absolutely can’t have him!” she shouted, clearly alarmed. The mark of Blazing Qilin was pulsing through her white glove.

Atra’s eyes snapped open, and she stared at her surroundings. Then, seeing Lydia, Saki, and me, she allowed her lids to droop shut again.

I was just about to scold my partner—when my little birds detected numerous figures approaching the front of the hotel.

“Lydia!” I shouted.

“Right!” she responded.

Out in the corridor, Cindy barked, “High alert!” and a chorus of

voices answered, "Yes, ma'am!" She then joined us in the room.

"This will be a long night," I told her. "If worse comes to worst, Lydia and I will go on the offensive."

"Take care of Atra when we do," Lydia added. "And none of this 'even if it costs me my life' nonsense. If you aren't scared of a talking-to from Allen, you should be!"

A smile creased Saki's face as she responded, "Yes, my lady."

Cindy let out an exclamation of startled joy when she saw her comrade's expression.

Then the pair stood at attention.

"Please rest assured that Miss Atra will be safe with the Leinster Maid Corps's number sixes, Saki..."

"And Cindy, as well as the rest of the local garrison!"

Together, they concluded, "Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen, may fortune favor you!"



"Marchese Carnien! Explain yourself! Mobilizing troops in the city of water is madness! What are you thinking?!"

Niche's shout boomed in the hotel entrance below us. He was facing a young man with dirty blond hair, who wore a sodden military cloak. Several dozen armed soldiers stood behind the newcomer.

Niccolò had left his room to peer down at the alarming scene. The blood drained from his face as he murmured, "N-Niche."

Tuna was weaving defensive earth spells.

"Carnien," Lydia muttered beside me. "He's one of the six southern marchesi."

"We'd better hurry," I said, taking Her Highness's hand and casting a wind spell so that we could listen in on the first-floor conversation while we descended the main staircase.

"Don Niche Nitti. I had heard that you were holed up in the assembly hall," said Marchese Carnien. His calm tone only made his actions more unsettling.

Paolo, who had been hanging back half a step behind Niche, stepped resolutely forward. "Marchese Carnien," he said, "I am the manager of this humble establishment, Paolo Solevino by name. What brings you here at this late hour...and accompanied by such a warlike retinue?"

Even at this distance, I could see the soldiers quail. Their morale wasn't high, it seemed.

As we gradually neared the first floor, Carnien spread his arms theatrically and launched into an explanation.

"Pardon my sudden arrival. I have received word that foreign agents have infiltrated this hotel. And not just any spies—these

dangerous individuals are after state secrets. I judged that I could not afford to overlook their activities.”

“Perish the thought! This humble establishment houses no such guests!” Paolo cried. Then, throwing off the mask of the elderly hotelier, he took a harsher tone. “I accept that this hour of national crisis gives rise to differences of opinion. However...”

We reached the second floor and no longer needed to rely on spells to hear. Paolo’s voice rang in our ears as, behind him, the hotel staff drew in their breath.

“Bringing swords into a debate is folly that goes against all the traditions of our league! Turn back!”

His shout hung in the air for a moment. Then Carnien said, “Are you of the same opinion, Don Niche?”

“Do you imagine that I would countenance such lawless behavior in the city?” Niche replied. “Especially when my own brother is the target of your folly? A Nitti never forsakes his own.”

“I see. I *had* hoped to resolve this peacefully.” Carnien raised his left hand, revealing a glimpse of a fine blue suit beneath his cloak.

His soldiers all drew their wands and rapiers as one and began weaving spells.

“Carlyle! Stop!” Niche shouted, abandoning decorum. “There will be no turning back from this!”

But the marchese said coldly, “Breach the hotel and arrest everyone inside.”

“Yes, sir!” The ranks of soldiers advanced, bearing down on Niche and Paolo.

I winked at my partner. “What do you think, Lydia? Shall we get going?”

“We might as well,” she replied, with a shrug. “The stars always enter late.”

And with that, we jumped down from the second floor. A clamor of voices followed.

“What?!”

“M-My sword!”

“Impossible!”

“Feathers made of fire?!”

“M-My legs! I... I’m stuck!”

The blade of every soldier’s rapier fell and became lodged in the floor as Lydia’s flames sliced through them. I, meanwhile, cast the elementary spell Divine Ice Vines as soon as I landed, entangling the soldiers’ legs and holding them in place.



Marchese Carnien fell back, evading our magic, but an unmistakable tinge of distress entered his eyes. “That fiery scarlet hair,” he growled, staring at the indomitable Lydia. “You must have Leinster blood! Then, the Nitti have already—”

“No,” Niche interjected at the same moment I said, “Not quite.”

Using my little birds outside, I sent a surreptitious signal to the maids on the upper floors.

“My *hair color* is all you have to go on?” Lydia asked mockingly from beside me. “Well, unfortunately for you, you’ve got the wrong person.” The scarlet-haired young woman waved her white-gloved right hand. “My name is Lydia Alvern, and I’m just an ordinary tourist staying at this hotel. What is all this fuss about? Is it a local tradition for soldiers to assault people in the middle of the night?”

A somewhat older man—evidently an officer—bellowed, “You dare—”

“Wait!” The marchese silenced him. Then, to Lydia, “I beg your pardon. My name is Carlyle, Marchese of Carnien. Although I apologize for this disturbance, this is an internal matter pertaining to the League of Principalities. Keep to yourselves, and no harm will come to you.”

“I don’t think so,” Lydia replied. “Although your squabbles are nothing to us...”

“We’ve gotten to know young Niccolò, whom your comrades assaulted,” I chimed in. “We can’t stand idly by while he comes to harm. And besides...”

An earsplitting crash resounded from the upper floors. A rain of broken glass followed—and then came men’s screams. While chunks of banister fell from the fourth-floor landing, sliced through by dark whips and keen blades, I adopted a mirthless grin.

“No one who speaks pleasantly at the front door while plotting an attack from the rear can be trusted to uphold his end of a bargain.”

“Th-They know about the infiltration team?!” the enemy officer cried. “B-But there were no signs of detection!”

His men were frantically struggling to escape their bonds.

“Then I have no choice,” the distressed marchese murmured, gripping the rapier at his hip.

“Leave, Carlyle!” Niche pleaded. “Not even you can overcome this pair!”

The marchese drew his sword regardless.

I sensed a wave of water mana. His weapon was no match for Cresset Fox or the Leinsters’ treasured blade, True Scarlet, but it *was* enchanted.

“Niche,” Carnien said heavily, “my actions are necessary. If the

doge leaves the city of water to meet with the Leinsters, peace may well result. And no matter how humiliating the terms of the treaty, most will soon forget. We must continue to fight.”

“Nonsense!” Niche shouted, furrowing his brow. “Our duty is to hammer out those terms!”

My little birds outside spotted another infiltration team attempting to gain entry via the rooftop terrace. And thanks to our strengthened mana link, I was able to instantly share the information with Lydia.

“The league must change,” the marchese pronounced dispassionately. “For that purpose, a little blood is needed. As is your younger brother.”

“Why Niccolò?!” Niche demanded. “You can’t be planning to threaten my house. My brother may have the *potential* to cast the supreme water spell, but he isn’t worth the risk you run. History will damn you!”

“Let it. I will add myself to the foundation of a new League of Principalities.”

Niche groaned.

“Have you forgotten what I just said?” Lydia icily asked two of the highest-born men in the league. “Have all the internal disputes you want. But...”

“We won’t let you lay a finger on Niccolò,” I said. “What are you plotting with the Church of the Holy Spirit? I assure you, they won’t dance to your tune.”

Carlyle froze. His gaze wavered slightly.

I gave my rod a twirl.

A thunderous roar split the air as innumerable chains smashed through the hotel’s first-floor windows and skylights, all aimed at Niche and us.

“It looks like the die is already cast,” I said. “Lydia!”

“Right!”

While Niche, Paolo, Carlyle, and his men stood stunned, we met the enemy attack head-on. Fiery plumes incinerated most of the chains, and the remainder ricocheted off flowers of flame, gouging chunks out of the floor. The lightning blade on my rod crackled forlornly with nothing to do.

I looked down at the bracelet on my right wrist, which was glowing scarlet.

Dad, what on earth did you let Lily talk you into?

While my feelings bordered on exasperation, the willful noblewoman who had just intercepted several thousand chains without lifting a finger eyed it with displeasure.

“Why did you attack?!” Carlyle shouted at the outside. “Who gave

the order?!”

“I exercised my own judgment,” a cold, mocking voice replied from near the front entrance.

A girl revealed herself, wearing a hooded, pure-white robe edged in crimson. She was short—scarcely taller than my younger students. Several men in hooded gray robes followed behind her.

I heard a second-floor window break, followed by the sound of running feet. Chains shot across the atrium, forming footholds overhead from which more gray-robed men armed with single-edged daggers took aim at us.

Carlyle grimly addressed the girl. “Edith.”

That’s the name of the apostle Stella mentioned. The one who—

“Why delay?” the girl scoffed. “You’re wasting time. Only one Nitti will serve as a sacrifice, but this man’s blood has its uses. Her Holiness would not wish us to waste this opportunity!”

She then turned to Lydia and me with hatred in her eyes. “As for you, don’t think I haven’t been listening. How dare you claim the odious name of Alvern in *my* presence! Still, the Leinsters’ cursed child and the defective key will make nice additions to the Nittis. You should be grateful that we’ve found a good use for the blood of those whose continued existence would only cause harm! Her Holiness the Saint will return your unclean blood to the world! Seize them! If they resist, you may kill all but the Nitti sacrifice!”

The inquisitors threw back their cloaks as they drew their single-edged daggers.

After a moment, Carnien said, “Assist them.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” his men responded. Having freed themselves from my vines, they also raised their weapons again.

“The Leinsters’ cursed child,” is it?

I advanced, my rod at the ready. Lydia let out a sigh, half in excitement.

“Paolo, see that no one moves,” Niche commanded, motioning the hotel staff to stay back.

“Yes, sir,” Paolo replied reluctantly. His subordinates stammered the same a moment later.

“I have so many questions for you,” I said, “but no one uses that name in my presence and gets away with it!”

I slammed the butt of my rod into the floor...and the whole hotel swayed and tilted. Plants burst up from below, assaulting the shocked inquisitors and soldiers without warning. Branches entangled our enemies on the first and second floors and held them fast. Although my spells were a far cry from Linaria’s, the offensive application of botanical magic still proved effective against groups. It was so powerful, in fact, that I would need to refine—

“She got away,” Lydia said, pointing her finger into the air.

The apostle had swiftly employed her chains to flee upward, slicing through branches with sinister charcoal-gray beams as she landed on the banister of the second-floor staircase. Carlyle, the commander of his force, and a handful of soldiers had also weathered the assault and retreated.

“Th-This magic,” Edith murmured, her mouth a taut rictus. “Can it be a witch’s—?”

“You’re wide open.” I cast my experimental bi-elemental spell Heavenly Wind Bound, instantly darting into range of the girl and swinging my rod in a downward strike.

A harsh metallic crash shook the air. My lightning-shrouded rod had cleaved through a dark-gray shield only to be stopped by a pitch-black dagger. I landed on the stairs below the spluttering apostle.

“The name ‘Edith,’ a white robe edged with crimson, and a single-edged dagger stained black,” I mused while I wove my next spells. “And you use shields of dark-gray light. You must be the apostle who summoned a skeletal dragon and cast the taboo spell Reverie of Restless Revenants at Rostlay.”

Lydia leapt onto the stairs above the girl. “You apostles sure are idiots,” she said, drawing Cresset Fox with deliberate slowness. “Don’t you even know whom you should absolutely never make angry?”

Edith fell silent. She started to shift her right foot slightly—then let out a wordless scream as she conjured charcoal-gray shields, desperately struggling to weather the storm of Divine Light Shots that Lydia and I unleashed in unison. Her defenses were inferior copies of the great spells Radiant Shield and Resurrection.

We stopped casting elementary spells once the scattered fragments began to worsen visibility.

“Who are you?!” Carlyle demanded from the first floor. “You’re no mere tourists!”

“Me?” I turned and shrugged. There could only be one answer. “I’m but a humble private tu—”

“He’s the Wainwright Kingdom’s greatest sorcerer!” Niche interrupted bitterly before I could finish. “The Brain of the Lady of the Sword!”

Carlyle’s eyes widened. “That nickname... You mean he actually exists?!”

“Sir, please call the retreat! We can’t face them alone!” the commander pleaded, tugging desperately on the marchese’s sleeve. The latter had lost his cloak, and his blue finery was torn.

Lydia smirked. “It sounds like they’re learning. So, what now, Mr. Greatest Sorcerer?”

I sighed, realizing that I would need to put up with her ribbing for

some time to come.

Two maids poked their heads out over the side of the fourth-floor landing.

“Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen!” Saki called, armed with two unrefined but sharp-looking knives.

“Enemy forces neutralized!” reported Cindy, who carried a black whip. “And not a casualty to speak of!”

The commander and his men groaned, and their voices shook.

“I... I don’t believe it.”

“Th-Thirty-six of our best men...”

“Crushed in no time at all?!”

“Such a stark contrast,” Carlyle muttered. “No, I knew what to expect. I knew, and I still...”

Although he sounded resigned, I could see a determined gleam in his eyes. I sensed that something was amiss as I cleared the air with a wind spell.

“Now, would you kindly tell us exactly what you’re doing here?” I asked the apostle, who was grimacing but otherwise unharmed.

She responded with muffled, mocking laughter, and there was nothing hopeless about it. The fact that she reminded me of Lev, the fanatic whom I’d battled in the eastern capital, made it all the more grating.

“Fool!” Edith scoffed at me. “You may be a trifle sooner than expected, but all is proceeding *as Her Holiness foretold*! I am Edith, a glorious apostle chosen by the Saint herself! No mere defective key—”

“We only need her to be able to speak, right?” Lydia jumped, catching the apostle off guard with a merciless slash. Her blade sheared through half the hotel, making the building screech and kicking up dust with a massive shock wave. The interior instantly went dark.

The maids and I cast numerous illumination spells.

The soldiers caught in my botanical magic were still right where I’d left them. As for the inquisitors...their severed limbs littered the floor, disintegrating into ash. So, they had wrenched themselves free. Carnien and his remaining men were gone as well.

“Damn,” Lydia spat, scattering plumes of flame in her irritation. “They run at the first sign of trouble!”

“Teleportation talismans,” I said. “I have birds tailing them. We’ll give chase.”

“Naturally!” Lydia promptly formed wings of fire.

Niccolò, Tuna, and even Atra—who was with Saki—peeked out at us.

“Saki, Cindy,” I called, “remain on high alert until we return! Tuna, please look after Niccolò. Paolo, Niche! I leave the prisoners in

your hands.”

“Yes, sir!” chorused all three maids.

“You may depend upon me, sir,” Paolo responded, with a respectful bow.

Niche glared at me in silence.

“Let’s go!” Lydia shouted, seizing my hand. I supported her with wind and levitation spells.

As we ascended, my eyes met Atra’s. The child clung to Saki, looking worried. Then my ring flashed, and our mana connected.

What?

“Allen,” Atra said. “There’s a scary, sad fiend. Be careful.”

“A scary fiend?” I repeated, making eye contact with Lydia as we hovered. After the recent fray, we had a good sense of the apostle’s capabilities. We had seen her trump cards, Radiant Shield and Resurrection, and we knew about her skeletal dragon and taboo spells. All the same, we couldn’t be too careful.

We both nodded to the child.

“Thank you, Atra.”

“We’ll take care.”

A moment passed; then Atra waved. “Okay.”

Immediately, Lydia picked up speed, soaring out a skylight and into the dark city sky.



Lydia and I flew through the slumbering, night-veiled city. The rain had let up, and ominous red moonlight filtered through gaps in the clouds. I recalled a bit of folk wisdom that my dad had taught me as a child: “You mustn’t go out on the night of the crimson moon, or the big, bad witches and vampires will get you.”

We passed over the Grand Canal, a spiderweb of smaller waterways, countless bridges, and buildings—the assembly hall and The Cat Parting the Seas on the central island, then Seven Dragons Plaza and the Grand Library in the north—as we closed in on our quarry. The apostle and her churchmen turned to single-use teleportation talismans to aid in their flight and split up as they went. But we were never in danger of losing track of Edith—I’d learned to recognize her mana in our earlier scuffle.

At last, she came to a halt on the Isle of the Brave.

We soared over its walls and woods—then gasped at the unearthly scene that suddenly spread out before us. The isle’s interior was blanketed in black and white flowers. The moss-covered stone building at its center must have been a shared tomb. Mana lamps stood here and there along the paths, illuminating the rain-damp flowers.

“There she is!” Lydia shouted.

Edith stood alone on a stone-paved path near the mausoleum.

“Lydia!”

“I won’t let my guard down!” the noblewoman immediately reassured me. I knew of no one I’d rather have on my side in a fight.

I raised barriers to protect the tomb as we slipped into the clearing and alighted before the apostle. Edith remained motionless, her hood pulled low, as I raised my rod and Lydia, her sword.

“Now, I’d like to continue our discussion,” I said. “Kindly answer our questions.”

Edith remained silent and unresponsive.

“The eastern capital, Avasiek, Rostlay, the Four Heroes Sea, and here, the city of water,” I continued, never relaxing my guard. In the air above us, I stealthily cast the elementary spell Divine Lightning Detection—among others. There were ambushers in the trees. “What is your ‘Saint’ plotting? She gathers great spells to churn out shoddy imitations and schemes to collect the blood of famous houses likely to act as carriers.”

The enemy was few in number. Some of them must have escaped during the chase. Yet I didn’t detect any of the spell-soldiers that the church had brought to so many battlefields.

“Why does she desire the great elementals?” I asked. “If you genuinely believe what you said at Rostlay about fully recreating the Saint’s Resurrection, I’ll be forced to question your sanity.”

Anger entered the mana of the girl before us, and a serpentine mark appeared on her left cheek. “Hold your tongue, defect,” she spat, skewering me with her hatred. “The likes of you could never comprehend the greatness of Her Holi—”

A bird of fiery death took flight before I had a chance to stop it. Edith quickly swung her dagger, surrounding herself with nearly a hundred fire-resistant barriers. But the avian menace struck the ground behind her, unleashing a blast of hellfire and a massive shock wave as myriad blazing plumes dyed the flowers scarlet. The supreme spell Firebird was the symbol of the Ducal House of Leinster, and mere proximity to its power had blown away all of the apostle’s defenses.

“If I hear another insult out of your mouth, I’ll turn you to ash,” Lydia said icily, leveling her sword point at Edith. “*I’m* the only one who gets to speak ill of him. I don’t remember giving you permission, and I never plan to. Do you want to burn?”

The apostle gnashed her teeth and snapped, “C-Curse you!” With another swing of her dagger, she prepared numerous charcoal-gray blades to fire. But then a startled cry escaped her lips as her spell formulae froze and disintegrated before reaching us. I had intercepted her barrage with an unnamed ice spell.

“That’s a lesser derivative of Radiant Shield,” I remarked. “I suppose you got it from Gerard. It’s also embedded with the formula for Resurrection...but I’ve seen all of that I can stomach. You might have some luck with the genuine spell, but mass-produced dregs won’t work anymore. I’ve seen far more advanced formulae in the depths of the Four Heroes Sea.”

Edith retreated half a step. The tip of her dagger wavered as she wailed, “F-Freak!”

“How rude. I’ll have you know I was the only man in the professor’s department with any right to call himself normal. Isn’t that right, Lydia?”

“Your jokes can wait.” My partner brushed me off.

All the while, our hidden foes in the trees were slowly drawing nearer, positioning themselves to surround us. Lydia and Lynne had experienced these same tactics at Avasiek.

While I prepared for their assault, I gave the apostle a dose of stark reality. “You can’t beat us. Not even a suicide charge will change that—my magic is faster. Give yourself up.”

The apostle made not a sound. She trembled...then let out a low chuckle. Soon, she was roaring with laughter. Her scornful peals filled the graveyard night.

Edith pulled a wooden church insignia from the neck of her robe and held it out as she scoffed, “Fool! Did you imagine that I—I, who was named an apostle by Her Holiness the Saint herself—came here without a plan?! Lagat!”

“Yes, ma’am!” a voice responded. A fraction of a second later, a chorus of others shouted, “We hear and obey!”

Fewer than ten gray-robed figures sprang out of the trees on all sides. In their hands, each held...a long-distance teleportation scroll. Space wavered as they unfurled their burdens in rapid succession, and multiple magic circles appeared, with Lydia and I caught between them. Slipping through them came heavily armored spell-soldiers with boxy helmets on their heads and hefty pikes and greatshields in their hands.

Sixteen of them in all!

The spell-soldiers thrust their shields forward, raised their pikes, and began constructing a potent magical array.

“I suppose you thought you’d run me down,” Edith gloated, her lips curling in ecstasy. I had no difficulty imagining what spell she was about to unleash. “But the truth is nothing of the kind! Do you remember this, cursed child and defect? You’ve tasted it before, from failures who couldn’t achieve the rank of apostle. Of course, this one has twice the power.”

The apostle leapt back, landing behind the gray-robes led by the

man she'd called Lagat. Raising her dagger aloft, she gave the signal.

"Two casts of a strategic barrier meant to contain the Eight Heresies: the Eightfold Divine Seal! Die!"

"Lydia," I shouted, "forward!"

"Right!"

At the same moment that the spell-soldiers activated their magic, I cast Black Cat Promenade, moving to one side of their rear line. A pair of Frost-Gleam Hawks fluttered down from the sky, becoming Azure Shields as my rod absorbed them. Amid a whirl of icy blossoms far more vivid than ever before—possibly a benefit of Lily's bracelet—I thrust my staff ahead of me and leaned forward.

I kicked off the ground, casting the bi-elemental compound spell Iced Lightning Sprint to gain even greater speed. Despite the odds, I lunged.

"I-Inter—"

Edith and Lagat tried to command the spell-soldiers, but they were too late! My Azure Shields became a spinning drill, which I drove into the spell-soldiers' least-protected flank. I plowed through all eight in the rear line, freezing them as they fell, and kept going. I didn't slacken my pace until I returned to the center of the clearing.

I felt warmth on my back. Bisected pikes and shields slipped from the hands of the front group of spell-soldiers. A moment later, the soldiers themselves toppled forward, and an inferno engulfed them.

"Bravo!" I exclaimed, unable to suppress a smile.

"You're not so bad yourself these days!" Lydia called back. Through our mana link, I could feel exactly what was in her heart: nothing but intense joy, relief, and unshakable confidence. Her feathers of flame responded to her emotions by changing from scarlet to bright white as her mana continued to grow.

Meanwhile, Edith and Lagat were stunned by how quickly the ace up their sleeve had been trumped. The apostle let out a startled cry, while her subordinate stammered, "Th-They defeated sixteen spell-soldiers before the spell could activate?!"

The inquisitors had gone down in history for their fearlessness, but beads of cold sweat stood out on even their foreheads.

I exhaled. Teleportation and acceleration magic were difficult to control, even for me, and I was still in the process of refining the latter. Rapidly casting a supreme spell and transitioning into a secret art on top of that had left me feeling exhausted.

"You don't have time to be tired," Lydia said. "And why didn't you use the Scarlet Sword?! That was more like *Lily's* fire flowers! Explain yourself!"

"Th-The Azure Spear is better for piercing." I hastily defended myself. "And I didn't make it flowerlike on purpose."

After a sully silence, Lydia snapped, "We'll have words about this later!" and slammed a Firebird into the forward group of spell-soldiers without turning to look at them. They had been flickering with gray light in an attempt to regenerate, but her white-hot flames quite literally reduced them to ash.

The spell-soldiers that I had frozen remained still. My inhibition spell, derived from silver-snow, appeared to be entirely effective.

"Wh-What's wrong?!" Edith wailed, her composure abandoned. "What are you waiting for?! R-Regenerate!"

I swung my rod, conjuring new Frost-Gleam Hawks and ice flowers as I gave the apostle another dose of reality. "Have you forgotten what I just told you? I've seen all of that spell that I can stomach."

I glimpsed a flicker of fear in the eyes of Edith and her men.

Amid fiery plumes and icy petals, the flowers were taking on the crimson of the moonlight. The clouds must have been clearing.

"Now," I continued, "will you kindly answer our questions?"

The wind blew, and Edith's hood shifted. She was younger than I'd imagined. I recalled what Stella had told me—how, according to Alice, the apostle had wolf-clan blood.

"What's so bad about what we're doing?!" she demanded, stamping the ground like a petulant child. "Well?! There are too many bad people in the world! Her Holiness laments that fact! She's tearfully trying to change it! She's in the right! I know she is! Once she completes the genuine Resurrection, the world will have peace!"

"Dangerous," I murmured.

"And foolish," added Lydia.

This so-called Saint must have had a way with words, skillfully framing her positions so that they were pleasant to the ear and difficult to disagree with. Perhaps she truly was saving others. But the reality wasn't so simple. In a world of endless, interminable life, where no one ever died, would people be able to feel that they were truly "alive"? My late best friend had been fond of saying, "If you ask me, you *can* have too much of a good thing."

Zel, I agree with you.

Edith's eyes turned bloodshot as she deployed a teleportation circle. The gray-robos teleported forward as well and gathered together, raising their hands to contribute mana toward summoning more spell-soldiers.

"As if we'd let you." Lydia conjured a massive Firebird and launched it in a forward offensive.

The apostle and her inquisitors swung their daggers, constructing a series of dark-gray shields. For a moment, these defenses held...but then the fell bird's flames consumed them.

“I-Impossible,” Lagat groaned while Edith panicked. “H-How can she be so powerful?!”

Lydia turned behind her and let out a sharp cry, mowing down the remaining frozen spell-soldiers with her enchanted blade. I could hardly believe her power—they crumbled to ash the moment she sliced through them.

“Stop wasting our time and show yourselves,” Lydia spat furiously. “This place is for the dead to rest in peace, not making me slice up dummies!”

The inferno burst apart, and the apostle’s force appeared, their robes singed and their mana severely depleted. Edith groaned and Lagat cursed, but they still seemed to have some fight in them. The other inquisitors, however, made no sound. They couldn’t take much more of this.

Lydia took a step forward, and the servants of the church took a step back.

“I’ve gotten used to your dummies’ armor,” she said. “Radiant Shield and Resurrection are no problem at all if I slash and burn harder than they can handle. Oh, and just to be clear...” Her scarlet hair turned redder still as fiery wings reappeared on her back. Another Firebird materialized overhead, only to dive at Cresset Fox and be absorbed, wreathing the blade in blinding white flame. She gave the sword a swing as she vented her displeasure. “Don’t think that he’s the only one you’ve angered. Death is too good for anyone who calls my Allen a ‘defect.’ Say your prayers, because I’ll slice you all to ribbons and incinerate you on the spot.”

Lydia’s mana grew even greater, and our enemies recoiled. Could she have been drawing on Blazing Qilin’s power without realizing what—

A chill ran down my spine.

What?

Instinctively, I looked toward the tomb. Someone emerged, tearing through our barrier. How had they avoided tripping the detection spells that I’d laid so carefully with the aid of Silver Bloom?

Edith shoved a hand into an inner pocket of her robe, her eyes bloodshot. “You—both of you—are dangerous. Too dangerous to tolerate. You may threaten Her Holiness one day.”

She produced two glass vials and brandished them aloft. Was that...blood and bone inside them?

“Therefore,” Edith continued with the look of a martyr, “we shall give all we have to stop you here and—”

“Lydia!” I shouted.

“I know!” she grunted, lifting me skyward to safety before the apostle finished speaking.

A split second later, a radiant beam of death scythed through space and flowers alike. It chopped down the mana lamps, leaving firelight the only source of illumination on the isle. And that wasn't even the full extent of the damage.

"It cut through the trees and the wall too?!" I gasped.

Lydia murmured, "That was one of Anna's techniques."

The attack had carved up the spot we had just been standing in and everything behind it. Through the billowing dust cloud, I could see a silhouette in the entrance to the tomb. Its nonchalant murmur reached my ears with inexplicable clarity.

"Oh? I missed? I meant to take a limb or two."

I recognize this voice.

A sudden gust cleared the air, revealing waist-length tarnished-silver locks that flowed from beneath a broad-brimmed black hat. A black-clad woman with a black umbrella in her left hand gazed up at us.

"Naughty children," she said. "I warned you. How sad. How simply, terribly tragic." The clouds parted, and a bloodred moon showed itself, staining everything a vivid crimson as the author of this tragedy declared, "Naughty children like you...could do with a little punishment."



"Alicia!" Edith cried once she recovered from her shock.

"Why, Edith, dear," said the woman who had wrought this destruction, looking puzzled as her right hand toyed with her long tarnished-silver hair. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Don't give me that!" the apostle snapped, the serpentine mark on her left cheek standing out in her fury. "Why did you interrupt my summoning?!"

"Oh, but you see," the woman said, starting to close her umbrella, "if you call up something like that, the whole plan will go up in smoke."

"What do you mean?" Edith asked slowly.

Something like what? The contents of Edith's vials?

I shot Lydia a look, and she nodded slightly. The apostle had meant to use blood and bone as a medium to manifest a skeletal dragon.

"This is the city of water, an ancient land blessed by dragons," the woman explained as if lecturing a child. "Dragons are magnanimous, merciful, and indifferent to humans. That said..." Her umbrella stopped moving as she looked up and focused her beautiful silver eyes on the apostle. Her crescent-moon earring caught the light, and her voice took on a glacial chill. "They make an exception when one of

their own is used. I wouldn't mind if you planned to level this city tonight, but if memory serves, it still has an important role to play in the Saint's plans. So you mustn't use dragon bone until the endgame. Or were you prepared for your actions to change the whole design and cost you your rank as an apostle?"

I could see Edith flinch. Belatedly, she faltered, "W-Well, I..."

The woman was familiar with the tendencies of dragons and inspired fear even in an apostle of the Holy Spirit. And... "Alicia." The legends spoke of *pale-silver* hair. Still, could she be genuine?

The woman vanished; then she brushed Edith's cheek. The apostle shuddered.

That wasn't teleportation. She just enhanced her physical abilities beyond belief.

"Don't sulk, Edith, dear," the woman said, chuckling. "I'll bully those darling children for you. So rest easy and withdraw."

The apostle didn't respond immediately. Then she and her men dropped to one knee and, with a curt "As you wish," vanished. As much as I would have liked to pursue them, we had more pressing concerns.

The woman turned and looked up at us, her crescent-moon earring gleaming with an eerie light. "Thank you both for waiting. I'll offer you a choice," she said, raising her right hand and uncurling one finger. "First: leave here this instant. You needn't fear pursuit—I'll let you go. This may surprise you, but I'm a woman of my word." Her tone left no doubt that she considered even the renowned Lady of the Sword her inferior.

She held up another finger. "Second: take my hand and join us. Especially you, young man—you show promise."

Lydia's eyes narrowed and glinted dangerously.

"Or third..." The woman raised a third finger, and her silver eyes blazed with curiosity. "Battle the great Shooting Star's *one and only* lieutenant, Alicia 'Crescent Moon' Coalfield, and leave the city of water a little worse for wear. I wholeheartedly recommend this latter course."

Coalfield? Not Coalheart?

"It sounds as though you won't let us go so easily after all," I said. "Lydia."

"I know," my partner replied. Despite our shock and my lingering doubts, we descended to the clearing, warily raising our enchanted sword and rod.

"I remain unconvinced," I told the woman. "Still, why? Why would someone of your caliber join forces with the Church of the Holy Spirit?"

According to tradition, Crescent Moon was a human of unknown

origins. And the War of the Dark Lord had been fought two hundred years ago—longer than any human life span. Was this woman really the legend supposed to have perished in the Battle of Blood River?

The ring on my right hand pulsed. At the very least, I knew she was dangerous.

Alicia spun in place like a dancer. “What a lovely night it is,” she said. “I even got to visit everyone’s graves. With that irksome Cornerstone around, I can’t even enter the city of water unless the night of the crimson moon is near.”

“‘Cornerstone?’” I echoed, puzzled by the unfamiliar term.

The warrior of old merely smiled. “So I’m in a simply wonderful mood right now.” She laughed, and my skin erupted in gooseflesh. My instincts sounded the alarm.

Alicia froze in place. “I’ll play with you a bit to show how grateful I am.”

A terrible chill shot down my spine, and I grabbed Lydia’s hand, teleporting us as fast as Black Cat Promenade would let me. I saw a field of fire flowers automatically deploy, then vanish as even the brick walkway was sliced to ribbons.



“This is no laughing matter,” Lydia muttered. Then she turned to me, looking concerned. “Are you all right after jumping this distance so suddenly?”

“I wouldn’t suggest trying it too often,” I panted. Dragging us from the Isle of the Brave to Seven Dragons Plaza had left my head aching like it was full of needles. Teleportation magic was extremely challenging at the best of times, and the farther I jumped, the more strain it put on my body.

I have a new appreciation of the headmaster’s and Chieftain Chise’s skill.

The nighttime plaza was deserted. Mana lamps surmounted seven columns, each crowned by a magnificent sculpture of a dragon. The thick paving stones were just what I would have expected from one of the city’s oldest monuments.

All else aside, we had managed to gain some distance. We could now regroup and—

A bloodlike barrier enveloped the entire plaza, and a carpet of crimson flowers covered the ground. Whirling petals filled the air.

Botanical magic?!

“You mustn’t run before we’ve had a chance to enjoy ourselves,” a woman’s voice said softly from behind us as an onslaught of invisible “lines” caught us off guard.

I waved my right hand, hastily deploying fire flowers. But while

they provided some protection, their numbers were rapidly dwindling.

I groaned and Lydia clicked her tongue as we retreated in a different direction. I rolled on the ground, simultaneously casting Heavenly Wind Bound and Iced Lightning Sprint. With the mobility the spells afforded me, I rose and leapt backward while activating Divine Lightning Detection.

I see them!

The strings were too numerous to count, but now that they were visible, I stood at least a slightly better chance of dodging them. Lydia seemed to have no trouble scattering the weapons with her sword and wings.

The woman in black, Alicia, held her umbrella in her right hand and controlled the strings with her left. “My,” she said, cocking her head to one side. “You must be familiar with this technique. I’m impressed. It was already on the verge of extinction two hundred years ago. But doesn’t it make for entertaining sport? You have the right idea when it comes to combating it, and your choice of spells is commendable, as is your precisi— Oh? What have we here?”

With a broad sweep of my rod, I multi-cast the elementary spell Divine Ice Vines in midair, freezing the strings bearing down on Lydia and me. At the same time, I cast one of the swiftest elementary spells in existence, Divine Light Shot, for all I was worth!

“How tiresome.” Alicia waved her left hand in annoyance, and fresh strings began intercepting my arrows of light.

“Lydia!” I shouted.

The scarlet-haired noblewoman had moved to Alicia’s other side. Holding her sword aloft, she roared, “No more games!” and launched her largest Firebird yet at the legend of old.

“Oh?” Distracted by my magic, Alicia was slow to respond...and suffered a direct hit.

Hellfire engulfed half the plaza. But neither Lydia nor I thought for a moment that this would be enough to bring down a seasoned warrior who had sped across battlefields with Shooting Star and Comet, and even crossed blades with the Dark Lord. Still, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to expect some damage after—

“Not bad. However...”

To Lydia’s and my shock, the flames parted to reveal Alicia. Neither her hat nor her dress nor even her umbrella was so much as singed.

She took Lydia’s best Firebird without a scratch?!

“Such tepid flames could never scorch *my* skin,” she taunted, twirling her black umbrella. “Won’t you at least give me more heat than the old Lady of the Sword—the one who fought in the War of the Dark Lord?”

Lydia filled the air with fiery plumes as she bared her canines. “I landed a direct hit,” she said forcefully, weaving a new bird of flaming death on the tip of her sword. “Old war hero or not, you can’t be unscathed.”

Firebird was a spell that incinerated everything. Its flames had burned even the greatest monsters we had faced—the black dragon, four-winged devil, and Stinging Sea. The only opponent immune to them had been...

Alicia gripped the brim of her hat. “Curious?” she asked. “Then I’ll make an exception and show you.”

The legend removed her black hat. The last clouds vanished. Ominous crimson moonlight poured down from the heavens, flooding the plaza in the color of blood. And then...

“I-It can’t be,” I gasped, so shaken that an undignified tremor entered my voice. “That’s...impossible! H-How could you be...?!”

Alicia’s appearance was rapidly transforming. A bloody red tinted her tarnished-silver hair. Her silver eyes flashed crimson. Long canines peeked out between her sneering lips. Her mana grew by an order of magnitude. She was as much a living calamity as any dragon or devil, and the natural enemy of any mortal creature: a vampire.

I had fought a pure-blooded vampire at least two centuries old once before. The battle had forever cost me Zelbert Régnier, my best friend and the mightiest sorcerer-swordsman short of Lydia. I had only survived due to his sacrifice. That was the whole, unvarnished truth.

Alicia replaced her hat on her head, responding to my half-shrieked question with a look of utter bewilderment. “What a silly thing to ask.” The crimson hue of her eyes continued to deepen. She covered them with her left hand as she said ever so softly, but with fierce conviction, “That ought to be obvious. To reclaim him—my Allen, and mine alone.”

The mana seeping from her alone sent slight tremors through the plaza, knocking flakes of stone loose from the battered columns, sending ripples through the water, and raising spray along the wharves. If we lost focus even slightly, our own mana would be *devoured*. Contrary to tradition, vampires didn’t drink blood—they fed on the mana of others.

Alicia continued her lament. “He—my Allen—should never have lost his life on that farcical battlefield! He could have lived...and done so, so much more to make the world a better place! And yet...” She lowered her left hand, revealing rivulets of tears on her cheeks. I recalled what Atra had said about a “sad fiend.” “He died. He died! He was murdered! All to save me...the world’s greatest fool.”

“So...” Alicia lowered the brim of her hat, and emotion left her voice as she announced her conclusion. “I stopped being a person.”

Faced with her staggering resolve, neither of us could bring ourselves to interrupt. Becoming a vampire was the taboo to end all taboos. Even for those who chose to cast the spell, the odds of success were one in a million.

Lydia's gaze wavered slightly. She was thinking, *I'd do the same if I lost Allen.*

Blood-silver eyes focused on me. "I *will* resurrect him," their owner said. "And this time, we'll save this hopelessly defiled world together. I suppose what I'm doing is laying the groundwork and tidying up. Now..."

Her magical defenses surpassed even a dragon's. I could see them clearly with my naked eyes. So that was what had stopped Lydia's Firebird.

"What will you do? What do you *want* to do, Allen of the wolf clan? Won't you tell me about yourself, 'Shooting Star of a new era'?" *She knows about me, not Lydia?*

While a tiny part of my brain pondered that fact, I racked the rest of it for magic that would be likely to work against the vampire.

"Not long ago," I said, "I had the honor of meeting Leticia 'the Comet' Lebufera."

My words hung in the air for a long moment.

"Did you now?" Alicia responded at last, her tone suddenly glacial.

"If she were here," I continued, resisting the urge to back down, "she would do everything in her power to stop you. And if Shooting Star Allen were alive, I have every faith that he would do the same."

A resigned and vaguely forlorn sigh greeted my assertion. "In that case," Alicia said, lowering her hat brim once more, "I suppose I'll leave you half-dead!"

"Lydia!" I shouted.

"I know!" Her Highness snapped back.

The vampiress, meanwhile, "merely" swung her left hand. Even that simple gesture created a tremendous shock wave.

With physical enhancement and a battery of support spells, I still barely avoided it. Two columns in the path of the blast crumbled, and a gaping hole opened in the building behind them.

This is absurd!

The principle was simple: she just focused mana in the palm of her hand and threw it. And yet...

"Come now," Alicia said. "What's wrong? Won't you even come near me?"

The distance between us was growing. Lydia was leagues better than me in melee combat, but even she was being slowly driven back.

"Can't you hijack her spells and dismantle them?!" my partner

demanded.

“No!” I grunted back, counterattacking with the advanced spell Swift Ice Lances. They fired at Alicia from all sides...but vanished before reaching her. Dragons and devils were creatures to be feared, but on a moonlit night, a vampire’s magical defenses surpassed either. No ordinary spell even posed a threat. And to make matters worse...

“She’s constantly changing her encryption!” I added. “Not even Radiant Shield or Resurrection was this— Lydia!”

Alicia had been motionless, but now she floated lightly off the ground—and shot forward, thrusting with her umbrella. She was charging straight at Lydia, who had just sliced through a shock wave with her sword.

Covering her with offensive magic...wouldn’t work. I’d never make it in time. So I channeled mana into my bracelet and conjured all the fire flowers I could manage, positioning them to guard Lydia.

The vampiress’s lips curled in delight.

“You idiot!” Lydia cried, just as Alicia shouted, “Hook, line, and sinker!” Stabbing her umbrella into the ground, she wrenched herself onto a different course.

Damn! She was after me all along!

I managed to dodge a thrust of her left hand, although that was half luck. A slight graze from her nails left me with a searing pain in my side. The talisman that my dad had worked into the lid of my pocket watch snapped, and a sharp grunt burst from me.

I heard Lydia screaming my name as the still-smiling vampiress demolished a column behind me, kicking up a massive dust cloud. Alicia brushed herself off, sneering down at me while I fell to my knees, gasping for breath.

“Such a softy,” she crowed. “Let me guess—you think about protecting others before yourself. I know all about that illness. It’s chronic and incurable. My one and only also— Oh?”

A massive Divine Fire Wave—with Lydia’s full power behind it—lapped over the whole area where the vampiress stood. Then several hundred walls of flame materialized, and the young woman who had literally flown to me thrust her enchanted blade into the ground, freeing both her hands to start casting healing spells. But despite both of us piling on advanced curative magic, my wound refused to close. This was the worst part of fighting a vampire—their mana lingered in wounds, preventing recovery.

I hung my head sheepishly and said, “Lydia, I’m so—”

“Don’t speak! Don’t apologize! And don’t cover for me!” she snapped, seizing me by the collar and nearly headbutting me. She was so close that our noses were in danger of colliding as she berated me.

“Look at me! Who’s at your side right now? Lydia Leinster,

remember? Not Tina Howard or Ellie Walker or Lynne Leinster or Stella Howard or Caren! We've been outclassed in plenty of fights before now...so hurry up and remember how we survived them!"

I blinked in surprise. We hadn't overreached to cover for each other when we'd faced more powerful foes before.

Lydia buried her face in my chest. "You idiot. You big, unbelievable fool. Don't just say you believe in me—actually do it on the battlefield."

"You're right," I said slowly. "Completely right. I haven't been living up to my words, have I?" I hugged her shoulders and stood up. At least half of the flame walls had already been breached.

"I'm glad you've seen reason," Lydia replied. "You've been so obsessed with tutoring that we haven't had as many chances to fight together. I wonder if *that's* why you relapsed into your old bad habits."

"Ow!" I cried as she mercilessly pummeled my chest with her fists. "Ow! That hurts! Have you forgotten I'm an injured man?!" After all our efforts, my wound had only just closed.

Lydia sniffed loudly.

"We can't let this fight drag on," I said. "Vampires gain mana on moonlit nights—especially under a crimson moon. And *this* vampire hasn't gotten remotely serious."

"The sorceress-swordswoman Crescent Moon, who fought the Dark Lord and lived to tell about it," Lydia mused. "She may be our strongest foe yet."

We both knew that there was only one way out of this fix. I looked at the scarlet-haired noblewoman, and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Mmm."

Lydia closed her eyes and trembled slightly. I screwed up my courage too...and kissed her mouth, intensifying our mana link to its limit.



All at once, white plumage enveloped us. Lydia slowly opened her eyes, touched her lips, and giggled. Then she pressed the same fingers to my lips—and drew her sword. The pale wings on her back became eight. She was as ready for battle as she would ever be.

The remaining flame walls vanished, shredded by a left hand.

“Have you finished your little council of war?” Alicia asked as she stepped through the fire, not even singed, much less burned.

Lydia and I replied with spirit.

“Yes!”

“And now it’s our turn!”

The vampiress laughed. “My, how very brave. Let me see what you can do.”

No ordinary attack could breach Alicia’s magical defenses. In which case...

“We can beat you!” Lydia declared, raising her sword straight above her head and beginning to gather all the mana she possessed.

“Yes, we can!” I immediately chimed in, swinging my rod and casting the strongest magic I could muster.

Red, blue, green, violet, *and white* mana raged. Then the kingdom’s four supreme spells—Firebird, Blizzard Wolf, Gale Dragon, and Lightning Lord Tiger—took shape simultaneously. These were the strongest fire, ice, wind, and lightning magic I knew, but at the same time, I couldn’t cast them repeatedly. Even if my partner’s mana held out, my control couldn’t stand the strain.

We’ll finish this with one strike!

Another sweep of my rod unleashed all four supreme spells on Alicia.

“My, aren’t you impressive,” the vampiress remarked, nonchalantly holding my magic at bay with her outthrust left hand. Mere proximity to the supreme spells was producing patches of scorching heat and frozen tundra, flashes of lightning and violent gusts, transforming the plaza into a scene not of this world. Still, it seemed as though Alicia couldn’t extinguish four spells this potent at once.

“But this won’t work on me,” she said coldly. “Your secret weapon —”

A pair of Frost-Gleam Hawks, which I’d kept in reserve directly overhead, suddenly dove at their target!

“...is these birds, I suppose.” Alicia countered with the black umbrella in her right hand. Both hawks dissolved as she impaled them...

“Th-This is witch’s—”

...and morphed into a colossal, thorny serpent of flame with blade

wings. Fire flowers sprang up, crowding around the vampiress. They couldn't harm her through her powerful defenses, but they could slow her down.

"Lydia!" I shouted.

"Ready when you are!" she answered immediately.

I raised my rod, crossing it with her sword. Even her eight wings were being sucked into the blade. *This* was our secret weapon: the Leinsters' Scarlet Sword at its maximum power!

Lydia was releasing her vast mana, while I focused on controlling it. However...

I groaned in agony. Lydia had emerged from the rebellion with far more mana than ever before, and the control formulae that I'd spent nearly a year constructing and refining buckled under the strain.

"Allen!" Lydia cried. The mark of Blazing Qilin surfaced on the back of her right hand. Then I felt a surge of Atra's mana, and the strain on my body suddenly vanished as the ring on my right hand flickered.

Lydia and I pooled all of our mana and shouted in unison:

"Take thiiiis!"

With all our might, we brought it crashing down on the ancient war hero!

Alicia had dealt with four supreme spells and a fire serpent simultaneously, but now her eyes widened. A flash of light swallowed her before she could utter a word.

Lydia and I braced each other as we weathered the shock and light as well. Then, at last, the radiance subsided, and a strained groan spilled from my lips.

The world-renowned Seven Dragons Plaza was in ruins, and both the barrier and the flowers had been blasted away as well. Yet the structure's foundation, supposedly wrought from boughs of the Great Tree, hadn't sunk.

The legend must be tru—

An excruciating headache came over me, and I severed my mana link with Lydia.

"Are you all right?" she asked, leaning in for a closer look at me. She seemed to have strength to spare, but I was nearly spent.

If Alicia is still in any shape to fight—

The sound of feet striking the ground cut my reflections short. We looked at each other in silence.

Alicia emerged from the flames, dusting herself off. Her black hat and umbrella were gone, and her black dress was in tatters, but she herself had sustained no damage. Her hair and eyes had resumed their normal color.

A monster.

She stopped brushing off dirt and murmured to herself, "I was fond of that umbrella. Still, my escort is here, so I suppose that's enough for tonight. After all, I *do* have duties of my own to attend to."

The vampiress vanished like mist. Then, to our shock, she was aboard a tarnished-silver wyvern flying overhead. I couldn't tell how she had moved. The rider wore a gray robe with a hood, but I took her for a woman.

"Thank you!" Alicia called, raising one hand. "That was fun. I thoroughly enjoyed myself." She paused. "Oh, that gives me an idea."

"Lydia!" I screamed as a pulse of unbelievably potent mana threatened to cover the entire city.

Oh no! This is seriously bad news!

Obeying my instincts, I scooped the scarlet-haired noblewoman up in my arms. She let out a little squeak as I leapt for all I was worth onto the last column standing.

The vampiress stood atop the wyvern's back. Her right hand gripped a sinister, flickering, jet-black longsword.

The blade of the Dark Lord?!

"You showed me something amusing," Alicia said. "I ought to return the favor."

She swung horizontally—a simple, semicircular slash. And with that unassuming gesture...she cleaved through the northern side of Seven Dragons Plaza, foundation and all. Lydia and I gaped as it sank into the sea.

But while words failed us, the legend returned her dark sword to the thin air from whence it had come. "I won't give you a third warning!" she called in a voice tinged with severity and solitude. "Leave the city of water as soon as you're able. Don't make me kill such charming children. If we meet on the battlefield when next I return to this land"—her freezing gaze pierced me, so cold that I could hardly imagine it had once been human—"I'll claim Thunder Fox and Blazing Qilin."

Leaving us motionless, the dark-silver wyvern departed southward. As it left, the rain resumed.

Holding Lydia tight, I murmured, "We lost, didn't we?"

"Yes, I suppose we did. I'll get us down," she replied, scooping me up in her arms this time and descending to the plaza.

The northern half of the monument was gone, and only one of its seven columns had survived. Now that the barrier had disappeared, lights came on in the buildings and people poured out in confusion.

Defeat weighed heavily on me. And yet...

I gave Lydia an awkward smile. "Still, we didn't give up Niccolò."

"No, I suppose we didn't."

"We didn't let them take Atra or Blazing Qilin either."

“True.”

“And most importantly—”

“You and I are alive.” Courage blazed in Lydia’s eyes.

It wasn’t as though we had never been beaten before. We knew the taste of defeat.

“The Church of the Holy Spirit took action because they didn’t want peace between the Leinsters and the league,” I said. “Political stability in the city of water doesn’t suit their plans. At least—”

“Until they have Niccolò and this ‘Cornerstone’ they need,” Lydia finished for me.

“We’ll look into the latter as soon as we can. The problem is Crescent Moon. A vampiress is nothing to sneeze at.”

A fallen legend had joined forces with the church. We were certain to clash with her again, and in the not too distant future.

“Coalheart” and “Coalfield.”

The connection to Rosa Howard also concerned me. All my research had hardly uncovered so much as a lead on the late duchess.

And she went south.

Lydia pulled her sword free of the ground where it had lodged. The enchanted blade flashed, and the shaky remains of the plaza split in two. Then she turned to me and haughtily declared, “Nothing to worry about. We’ll win next time!”

“You make it sound easy.”

“Why shouldn’t I? After all”—she sheathed her sword with a grace I couldn’t help but admire—“have we ever fought side by side and *not* come out on top?”

After a moment, I said, “I really am no match for you.”

Lydia and I shared a nod. We wouldn’t fail again.

“What on earth...?!” a voice cried from behind us. “Are you hurt?! What happened?!”

I turned to see Niche running toward us at the head of a small band of soldiers. He must have marched all the way from the hotel without stopping.

Has he never heard of caution?

I cracked a rueful grin. “Let’s head back for now,” I said to Lydia. “Atra and the maids must be worried. As for cleaning up this mess...”

“We’ll dump that job on Niche Nitti, I presume?”

Epilogue

“Welcome back, Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen!” Cindy exclaimed, greeting us before the Water Dragon Inn with a broom in hand. “Are you hurt? We’ve all been beside ourselves with worry since we sensed that astonishing mana.”

After exchanging a few words with Niche, who had promised to return to his mansion as soon as he sorted out the mess in the plaza, we had returned to the hotel alongside the first light of dawn. The maids and staff were in the midst of making repairs and tidying up.

“We’re tired but otherwise no worse for wear,” I replied, stowing Silver Bloom. “Unfortunately, the church’s agents gave us the slip, so we’ll all need to exercise extreme caution. Niche returned to his mansion. As for Niccolò and Tuna, he left us with the affectionate message ‘*You look after those two.*’”

“Understood! Your safe return comes as a great relief. That said...” The cheerful maid suddenly smirked. Her colleagues were also whispering animatedly as they worked.

Lydia let out a low groan. She was wrapped around my left arm, her fingers twined with mine.

Cindy brought her hands together and finished, “Lady Lydia might be running a fever!”

The temperature spiked. Nevertheless, Lydia made no move to disentangle herself as she glared at the maids. “Cindy, don’t you all have better things to do?”

“Mr. Allen, thank you very much! If you’ll excuse us, we have duties to attend to!” the maids chorused, throwing me perfect salutes. They then scattered, leaving only Cindy.

Hmm... I suppose they wouldn’t really be Leinster maids otherwise.

With that strange conviction in the back of my mind, I said, “Are Atra, Niccolò, and Tuna upstairs?”

“Yes, sir! Saki is keeping an eye on them.”

We followed the irrepressible maid into the hotel. The previous night’s raid and the accompanying battle had left the flawless decor in shambles. The skylight was broken, the tables and chairs were smashed, and most of the other furnishings were damaged. The roots and branches must have been tidied away, because I saw no sign of them. I did, however, see the hotel staff and Leinster maids busily cleaning as I climbed the partially destroyed staircase.

"I have left Mr. Paolo to question the Carnienite prisoners," Cindy informed us, assuming a most intelligent expression. "I believe that he was once the House of Nitti's finest intelligencer."

We need to get word back to the southern capital as soon as possible. Speaking of which...

"Niche mustered a band of Nitti soldiers after we set out in pursuit, didn't he?" I asked.

Cindy nodded, frowning. "Yes, sir. I tried to stop him, but he was firm in his purpose. He told us, 'This hotel is at risk. The Nitti keep an old house in the city's ruined district as a secret archive. Use it. Paolo knows the precise location.' He also stated that he will be in touch with classified information from within the Committee of Thirteen when circumstances permit."

"He has courage, if not caution," I said slowly, half-amazed even though I had anticipated this message. Our enemies had mobilized troops without hesitation to thwart the peace process, yet Niche was still wholly dedicated to finding a bloodless solution! He'd even left his brother in our care. Did that indicate a measure of trust?

Lydia's dainty finger prodded my cheek. "You're making a weird face."

"Wh-What a heartless thing to say," I spluttered.

"There's nothing heartless about it. You only have yourself to blame for looking like that when I'm right here!" Her voice took on an intensely sullen quality. Our unexpected run-in with Crescent Moon must have shocked her as much as it had me. For all her bold posturing, the physical and mental fatigue seemed to be taking quite a toll on her.

"Hmm... I see," Cindy murmured, nodding repeatedly. "The girls in the southern and royal capitals must get a taste of this feeling every day! What a learning experience this has been! Oh, I can't decide whether to apply for a transfer!"

I let out a dry chuckle. Lily and Cindy would make for a tumultuous combination.

We reached the fourth floor. Even up here, maids were assiduously clearing debris and repairing damage.

Our cheerful guide saluted us and said, "I'll go check on everyone's progress!"

"Rest in shifts," I told her.

"And don't skip meals," Lydia added.

With an enthusiastic "Absolutely!" Cindy approached her fellow maids.

Lydia and I made straight for our room, where we found an exhausted boy and girl waiting for us in the corridor.

"Niccolò, Tuna," I said.

“A-Allen!” exclaimed the flustered boy with pale-aqua hair. His part-elven maid bowed deeply without a word.

“I’m so glad you’re safe,” I continued, my left arm still firmly in Lydia’s clutches. “Niche would kill me if I let anything happen to you.”

The boy’s face swiftly fell. “I very much doubt that. My brother despises me. I’m nothing but a burden to him.”

“Don Niccolò,” Tuna murmured, watching her young master as though she were about to weep.

It looks like Niche’s feelings haven’t gotten through to his brother. Well, I suppose I’d better earn that information.

“Niccolò,” I said, “what I’m about to tell you is just me being a busybody.”

“A-All right.”

“First, the Niche Nitti I know is a bigger man than that,” I continued, proceeding down the broad, battle-damaged corridor. “You have my word that he cares deeply for you.”

Lydia tightened her grip on my left arm.

Ow!

I waved my free right hand. “Think back to yesterday. As heir to the Nitti name, he’s been running around like a madman to arrange peace. I doubt he even gets a decent night’s sleep. Yet the moment he learned that his brother had been attacked, he dropped everything and came here alone. How do you explain that if he doesn’t care for you?”

Niccolò blinked in astonishment. “Do you, er, know my brother?” he asked timidly. “He wrote that the two of you had never spoken.”

“I never forget the name of someone I’ve spoken to, even if it was only once. That’s one of my few talents. But please, don’t mention it to him. Tuna, the situation is in flux. If worse comes to worst, please consider fleeing the city with Niccolò. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll speak to you both again later.”

“O-Of course!” master and servant answered in unison and returned to the room provided for them.

Lydia rested her head on my shoulder and said, “Was he really there?”

“He was,” I replied.

“Hmm...” She sounded skeptical. Still, I was telling the truth.

We soon found ourselves at our own door. I knocked, and from within, Saki responded, “I-It isn’t locked.” She sounded bewildered.

When I opened the door, the lovely maid rose from her chair before the bed. “Lady Lydia, Mr. Allen,” she said, looking confused even as she bowed.

“Saki?”

“What’s wrong?” asked Lydia.

Silently, the maid cast a grave look at the bed...where a fox cub was sleeping curled up in a ball.

“She transformed last night,” Saki explained, “immediately after a flash shot through the north of the city.”

I laid my right hand on Atra’s head.

Right after a flash of light, was it? She must have helped to control the Scarlet Sword’s maximum power.

The fox cub’s ears and tail twitched in her sleep as I petted her.

“Forgive me,” I said, bowing to Saki. “We never explained, did we? You see—”

A loud crash from outside cut my words short. All three of us exchanged looks and rushed to the balcony.

Smoke was rising from spots throughout the city of water. And to judge by the movements of mana, the skirmishes were growing fiercer.

“It appears it’s begun,” I said.

“Yes,” murmured Lydia.

Even now, there was still hope. The lack of major armies in the city meant that disaster would be averted so long as the heads of its houses controlled themselves. The real problem was the shadowy machinations of the church—and the reemergence of the fabled war hero Crescent Moon, who had survived for more than two centuries through her voluntary descent into vampirism. Marchese Carnien’s actions also concerned me—he had come too far to turn back.

Anything for reform, is it? I find that difficult to believe.

The door slammed open and Cindy rushed in, crying, “Lady Lydia! Mr. Allen! You have a letter from Don Niche Nitti!”

That was quick. And bad news, I take it.

I accepted the note from Cindy and ran my eyes over it.

On the bed, Atra stretched, woken by our voices.

“What does it say?” Lydia asked curtly, crossing her arms.

“That yesterday’s confrontation set off skirmishes between hawks and doves all over the city. But ‘because the number of troops in the city is limited, a major clash seems unlikely in the short term. Carnien is holding his peace for the present.’”

“Just like you predicted, then. But the situation is only going to get worse.” The scarlet-haired noblewoman walked over to the bed and sat down. Atra relocated to her lap, tail wagging and ears twitching happily.

I grimaced. “What a thorny problem.”

“The same as always,” Lydia shot back, handily forestalling any further protest on my part. “We’ll take a nap for now,” she told the maids. Then to me, “What are you waiting for? Give them their

marching orders.”

“No, you should really be the one to—”

“I delegate all authority to you.”

With that, my partner scooped up Atra in her arms and lay down.

I scratched my head and said, “Saki, please arrange a cordon of magical creatures to give us an early warning of danger. But under no circumstances overtax yourself. Whichever way the wind blows, we ought to have a little more time before matters come to a head. Our enemies’ current objectives are Niccolò, Lydia, and Atra.”

“Understood, sir.” The maid gazed fondly at the lady and the fox cub, then her lovely eyes brimmed with fighting spirit.

“Cindy, kindly borrow a full map of the league from Paolo. And...” I recalled the old manager’s remark that he had been born and raised in this city. “Ask him to tell you the location of the secret archive. We’ll move there as soon as we’ve had our nap.”

“Yes, sir!”

I sat on the bed and stroked Atra. Lydia and I would have been in real trouble if not for her.

“Also, look into the significance of the word ‘Cornerstone’ in the city of water,” I told the maids. “Consulting Niccolò may save you time, since he seems to have a good many old books under his belt.”

“The city’s...”

“Cornerstone?”

Saki and Cindy looked nonplussed. Although they were stationed here, this term didn’t appear to ring any bells.

“And one last thing.” I lowered my voice. “The Old Temple. I’d like you to find out what’s there and what function it serves. It seems to be more than an ancient ruin.”

As soon as the two maids started to leave the room, Lydia tugged on my hand and grunted, “Mmm.” She gave me a wheedling look, urging me to lie down beside her. I was too tired to resist.

The scarlet-haired young woman shifted, snuggling up against me and burying her head in my chest. I stroked it as I murmured, “That sure took it out of us, huh?”

“You can say that again.”

We fell silent. By mustering all of the strength we now possessed, we had just barely staved off defeat. But we’d fallen far short of victory, and we both knew it, even if we didn’t put it into words. Even so...

“Lydia.”

“Hmm?” The young woman raised her head.

“I’ll give you the same answer you gave me in the plaza,” I said. “Next time, we’ll win—together.”

Lydia blinked her big eyes a few times, then nodded, satisfied. "Of course we will."

Elsewhere on the bed, Atra let out a joyful yip.



"Yes, Edith dear, that's right. If we act openly now, the marchesi who favor peace will speed up troop deployments to the city of water. We can defeat their forces, but wouldn't that be a nuisance? I'll crush Rondoiro and the rest of them neatly, one by one, so focus on recuperating for now. You have a little more time before the final battle," I told the little apostle via a communication talisman. She was a good girl, all eagerness to atone for her blunders the previous night, but she might have been a touch too reckless for her own good.

"Was that wise?" asked the girl in a hooded gray robe who was skillfully maneuvering our wyvern just above the surface of the sea. "I'm certain that you, of all people, could have beaten those two."

"Don't be boorish, Viola," I chided the Saint's overserious personal guard. At the same time, I opened an old book, the title of which had been lettered in deep red: *The Secret History of the War of the Dark Lord, Volume Two*. To think that my little sister had turned my letters from the battlefield into a record like this.

I savored the pleasant south-sea breeze as I continued, "I enjoy fighting, but I don't kill for the pleasure of it. And I have no quarrel with those children."

The previous night's battle had thrilled me like nothing else had in ages. When had I last enjoyed myself so much? Perhaps not since my tussle with the nearly awakened Wainwright girl in the royal capital, and that had been a hundred years ago.

Those children had clearly stood no chance against me. Yet they had still done their utmost, trusting each other and never for a moment losing heart. They reminded me of myself two hundred years ago—when I'd still had faith in the world.

"And the girl who drew this design deep in the pontiff's palace wishes for no such thing," I solemnly cautioned my student. "Have you forgotten what she always says? Things are going so swimmingly that it frightens her."

"Forgive me," Viola murmured, then sank into awestruck silence.

"A key—defective, but the last of them—is trying to take up the mantle of Shooting Star with an adoring cursed child at his side," I mused to myself. "Just like the two of *them*. And such brazen flaunting is bound to make me jealous."

My eyes must have been crimson with the joy of battle.

"Another week until next Darknessday, when the dragons' sealing wards on the Old Temple will be at their weakest. We've found our

‘sinful principe’ to sacrifice. And once we obtain the Cornerstone, we’ll be a step closer to our ultimate goal. Anyone who calls himself Shooting Star ought to be able to overcome a little adversity like this. Still...” On a whim, I swiped my left hand in front of me, and the resulting shock wave caused an explosion on the sea’s surface. “I, Alicia Coalfield, will triumph. Until the day that the plan reaches fruition, the Saint’s words must be absolute. I’ll strike down nascent legends, clever schemers, fearsome dragons, and even the noble great elementals to gain everything!”

Afterword

Riku Nanano here. It's been four months, and with volume ten, I'm celebrating entry into double digits. This is all thanks to readers like you; cura, who draws truly fantastic illustrations for every volume; and the editors who rein in this loose cannon of an author. Considering how cutthroat the market is these days, I feel truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to write so much.

But I've still got a whole lot more where that came from, so I'm determined to keep giving it my all. At the very least, I want to spend my fourth year as an author writing!

As for the volume itself, the cover has been one of my goals ever since volume one. I always planned to someday write a volume where Lydia gets Allen all to herself. I'm glad that I got to check that off the list. Of course, the plan is for almost all of part three to be Lydia's turn! I'll just have to make sure that a certain Saint Wolf and scheming princess who stubbornly demand more time in the spotlight every volume get the message.

Announcement time! Volume five of *Henkyō Toshi no Ikuseisha* (*The Mentor in a Frontier City*) goes on sale this winter. The manga adaptation also goes on sale in September, at almost the same time as *Private Tutor's*, so please give it a shot.

I'd like to thank all the people who helped me:

My editor. I gave you plenty of trouble again this volume. Now...on to my next manuscript.

The illustrator, cura. Your work on the special edition, the cover, the color pages, and the interior illustrations was flawless! Every time I receive your art, I feel motivated to work hard on the next volume.

And all of you who have read this far. I can't thank you enough, and I look forward to seeing you again. In the next volume: the darkness of history and the students' struggle.

Riku Nanano



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Author
Riku Nanano

Illustrator
cura

Private Tutor to the Duke's Daughter

The Millennial Capital



“Never
leave me again.
As long as you’re
with me, I’ll go
anywhere.”

Duke Leinster’s eldest daughter

Lydia

The Lady of the Sword has been the albatross
around Allen’s neck since they enrolled in the Royal Academy.
As brilliant as she is beautiful, this young noblewoman’s
sorcery and swordplay are second to none.
With Allen in tow, she fled to the city of water,
the capital of the League of Principalities.

Private Tutor to the 10 Duke’s Daughter

The history of the city of water, the heart of the League of Principalities, stretched back into antiquity. At least a thousand years ago, people had gathered on this infertile ground and formed a trading settlement. According to tradition, the beastfolk had built up the city's foundations. Then, people of all races had pooled their efforts to furnish it with the Grand Canal, one of the wonders of the continent. The city of water was the oldest mortal city—a peerless treasure that nameless masses had shown to the world.





Allen's younger sister
Caren

"But anyway,
how did you even
get your bust to
grow so—"

"Mr. Allen will be
cross if you work
yourself too hard,
Felicia."

Duke Howard's eldest daughter
Stella

Allen & Co.'s head clerk
Felicia

"Oooh... Stella,
you meanie."

"I ate good food,
got plenty of sleep,
and kept active,
and this is how
I turned out!"

Fashion designer's model
Lily



“So...I stopped
being a person.”

Crescent Moon

Alicia Coalfield

The legendary Shooting Star's lieutenant,
long believed dead.

Private tutor to the dukes' daughters

Allen

“If Duchess
Leticia were here, she
would do everything in her
power to stop you.”

Private Tutor to the
Duke's Daughter

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“Same here!
I’m Cindy,
also number six
in the corps!”

“I have been
granted the position
of number six in the
Leinster Maid Corps.
My name is Saki.”

Partnered maids

Cindy & Saki

These two jointly serve as number
six in the Leinster Maid Corps.
Although permanently stationed in the city
of water, they have heard of Allen’s exploits
and harbor a deep respect for him.





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by Riku Nanano

Translated by William Varteresian
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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